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IV.

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LECOQ, THE DETECTIVE.

CHAPTER I.

THE SEARCH.

AT about eleven o'clock in the evening of the 20th of February, 186—, which chanced to be Shrove Sunday, a party of detectives left the police-station near the old Barrière d'Italie to the direct south of Paris. Their mission was to explore the district extending on the one hand between the highroad to Fontainebleau and the Seine, and on the other between the outer boulevards and the fortifications.

This quarter of the city had at that time anything but an enviable reputation. To venture there at night was considered so dangerous that the soldiers from the outlying forts who came in to Paris with permission to go to the theatre, were ordered to halt at the barrière, and not to pass through the perilous district excepting in parties of three or four.

After midnight, these gloomy, narrow streets became the haunt of numerous homeless vagabonds, and escaped criminals and malefactors, moreover, made the quarter their rendezvous. If the day had been a lucky one, they made merry over their spoils, and when sleep overtook them, hid in doorways or among the rubbish in deserted houses. Every effort had been made to dislodge these dangerous guests, but the most energetic measures had failed to prove successful. Watched, hunted, and in imminent danger of arrest though they were, they always returned with idiotic obstinacy, obeying, as one might suppose, some mysterious law of attraction. Hence, the district was for the police an immense trap, constantly baited, and to which the game came of their own accord to be caught.

The result of a tour of inspection of this locality was so certain, that the officer in charge of the police post called to the squad as they departed: "I will prepare lodgings for our guests. Good luck to you and much pleasure!"

This last wish was pure irony, for the weather was the most disagreeable that could be imagined. A very heavy snow storm had prevailed for several days. It was now beginning to thaw, and on all the frequented thoroughfares the slush was ankle-deep. It was still cold, however; a

damp chill filled the air, and penetrated to the very marrow of one's bones. Besides, there was a dense fog, so dense that one could not see one's hands before one's face.

"What a beastly job!" growled one of the agents.

"Yes," replied the inspector who commanded the squad; "If you had an income of thirty thousand francs, I don't suppose you'd be here." The laugh that greeted this common-place joke was not so much flattery as homage to a recognised and established superiority.

The inspector was, in fact, one of the most esteemed members of the force, a man who had proved his worth. His powers of penetration were not, perhaps, very great; but he thoroughly understood his profession, its resources, its labyrinths, and its artifices. Long practice had given him imperturbable coolness, a great confidence in himself, and a sort of coarse diplomacy that supplied the place of shrewdness. To his failings and his virtues he added incontestible courage, and he would lay his hand upon the collar of the most dangerous criminal as tranquilly as a devotee dips his fingers in a basin of holy water.

He was a man about forty-six years of age, strongly built, with rugged features, a heavy moustache, and rather small, grey eyes, hidden by bushy eyebrows. His name was Gévrol, but he was universally known as "the General." This sobriquet was pleasing to his vanity, which was not slight, as his subordinates well knew; and, doubtless, he felt that he ought to receive from them the same consideration as was due to a person of that exalted rank.

"If you begin to complain already," he added, gruffly, "what will you do by-and-bye?"

In fact, it was too soon to complain. The little party were then passing along the Rue de Choisy. The people on the footways were orderly; and the lights of the wine-shops illuminated the street. All these places were open. There is no fog or thaw that is potent enough to dismay lovers of pleasure. And a boisterous crowd of maskers filled each tavern, and public ballroom. Through the open windows came alternately the sounds of loud voices and bursts of noisy music. Occasionally, a drunken man staggered along the pavement, or a masked figure crept by in the shadow cast by the houses.

Before certain establishments Gévrol commanded a halt. He gave a peculiar whistle, and almost immediately a man came out. This was another member of the force. His report was listened to, and then the squad passed on.

"To the left, boys!" ordered Gévrol; "we will take the Rue d'Ivry, and then cut through the shortest way to the Rue de Chevaleret."

From this point the expedition became really disagreeable. The way led through an unfinished, unnamed street, full of puddles and deep holes, and obstructed with all sorts of rubbish. There were no longer any lights or crowded wine-shops. No footsteps, no voices were heard; solitude, gloom, and an almost perfect silence prevailed; and one might have supposed oneself a hundred leagues from Paris, had it not been for the deep and continuous murmur that always arises from a large city, resembling the hollow roar of a torrent in some cavern depth.

All the men had turned up their trousers and were advancing slowly, picking their way as carefully as an Indian when he is stealing upon his prey. They had just passed the Rue du Château-des-Rentiers when suddenly a wild shriek rent the air. At this place, and at this hour, such a

cry was so frightfully significant, that all the men paused as if by common impulse.

"Did you hear that, General?" asked one of the detectives, in a low voice.

"Yes, there is murder going on not far from here—but where? Silence! let us listen."

They all stood motionless, holding their breath, and anxiously listening. Soon a second cry, or rather a wild howl, resounded.

"Ah!" exclaimed the inspector, "it is at the Poivrière."

This peculiar appellation "Poivrière" or "pepper-box" was derived from the term "peppered" which in French slang is applied to a man who has left his good sense at the bottom of his glass. Hence, also, the sobriquet of "pepper thieves" given to the rascals whose specialty it is to plunder helpless, inoffensive drunkards.

"What!" added Gévrol to his companions, "don't you know Mother Chupin's drinking-shop there on the right. Run."

And, setting the example, he dashed off in the direction indicated. His men followed, and in less than a minute they reached a hovel of sinister aspect, standing alone, in a tract of waste ground. It was indeed from this den that the cries had proceeded. They were now repeated, and were immediately followed by two pistol shots. The house was hermetically closed, but through the cracks in the window-shutters, gleamed a reddish light like that of a fire. One of the police-agents darted to one of these windows, and raising himself up by clinging to the shutters with his hands, endeavoured to peer through the cracks, and to see what was passing within.

Gévrol himself ran to the door. "Open!" he commanded striking it heavily. No response came. But they could hear plainly enough the sound of a terrible struggle—of fierce imprecations, hollow groans, and occasionally the sobs of a woman.

"Horrible!" cried the police-agent, who was peering through the shutters; "it is horrible!"

This exclamation decided Gévrol. "Open, in the name of the law!" he cried, a third time.

And no one responding, with a blow of his shoulder that was as violent as a blow from a battering-ram, he dashed open the door. Then the horror-stricken accent of the man who had been peering through the shutters was explained. The room presented such a spectacle that all the agents, and even Gévrol himself remained for a moment rooted to the threshold, shuddering with unspeakable horror.

Everything denoted that the house had been the scene of a terrible struggle, of one of those savage conflicts which only too often stain the barrière drinking dens with blood. The lights had been extinguished at the beginning of the strife, but a blazing fire of pine logs illuminated even the furthest corners of the room. Tables, glasses, decanters, household utensils, and stools had been overturned, thrown in every direction, trodden upon, shivered into fragments. Near the fireplace two men lay stretched upon the floor. They were lying motionless upon their backs, with their arms crossed. A third was extended in the middle of the room. A woman crouched upon the lower steps of a staircase leading to the floor above. She had thrown her apron over her head, and was uttering inarticulate moans. Finally, facing the police, and with his back turned to an open door leading into an adjoining room, stood a young man, in front of whom a heavy oaken table formed, as it were, a rampart.

He was of medium stature, and wore a full beard. His clothes, not unlike those of a railway porter, were torn to fragments, and soiled with dust and wine and blood. This certainly was the murderer. The expression on his face was terrible. A mad fury blazed in his eyes, and a convulsive sneer distorted his features. On his neck and cheek were two wounds which bled profusely. In his right hand, covered with a handkerchief, he held a pistol, which he aimed at the intruders.

"Surrender!" cried Gévrol.

The man's lips moved, but in spite of a visible effort he could not articulate a syllable.

"Don't do any mischief," continued the inspector, "we are in force, you cannot escape; so lay down your arms."

"I am innocent," exclaimed the man, in a hoarse, strained voice.

"Naturally, but we do not see it."

"I have been attacked; ask that old woman. I defended myself; I have killed—I had a right to do so; it was in self-defence!"

The gesture with which he enforced these words was so menacing that one of the agents drew Gévrol violently aside, saying, as he did so: "Take care, General, take care! The revolver has five barrels, and we have heard but two shots."

But the inspector was inaccessible to fear; he freed himself from the grasp of his subordinate and again stepped forward, speaking in a still calmer tone. "No foolishness, my lad; if your case is a good one, which is possible after all, don't spoil it."

A frightful indecision betrayed itself on the young man's features. He held Gévrol's life at the end of his finger; was he about to press the trigger? No, he suddenly threw his weapon to the floor, exclaiming: "Come and take me!" And turning as he spoke he darted into the adjoining room, hoping doubtless to escape by some means of egress which he knew of.

Gévrol had expected this movement. He sprang after him with outstretched arms, but the table retarded his pursuit. "Ah!" he exclaimed, "the wretch escapes us!"

But the fate of the fugitive was already decided. While Gévrol parleyed, one of the agents—he who had peered through the shutters—had gone to the rear of the house and effected an entrance through the back door. As the murderer darted out, this man sprang upon him, seized him, and with surprising strength and agility dragged him back. The murderer tried to resist; but in vain. He had lost his strength: he tottered and fell upon the table that had momentarily protected him, murmuring loud enough for everyone to hear: "Lost! It is the Prussians who are coming!"

This simple and decisive manœuvre on the part of the subordinate had won the victory, and at first it greatly delighted the inspector. "Good, my boy," said he, "very good! Ah! you have a talent for your business, and you will do well if ever an opportunity——"

But he checked himself; all his followers so evidently shared his enthusiasm that a feeling of jealousy overcame him. He felt his prestige diminishing, and hastened to add: "The idea had occurred to me; but I could not give the order without warning the scoundrel himself."

This remark was superfluous. All the police-agents had now gathered around the murderer. They began by binding his feet and hands, and then fastened him securely to a chair. He offered no resistance. His wild excitement had given place to that gloomy prostration that follows all un-

natural efforts, either of mind or body. Evidently he had abandoned himself to his fate.

When Gévrol saw that the men had finished their task, he called on them to attend to the other inmates of the den, and in addition ordered the lamps to be lit for the fire was going out. The inspector began his examination with the two men lying near the fireplace. He laid his hand on their hearts, but no pulsations were to be detected. He then held the face of his watch close to their lips, but the glass remained quite clear. "Useless," he murmured, after several trials, "useless; they are dead! They will never see morning again. Leave them in the same position until the arrival of the public prosecutor, and let us look at the other one."

The third man still breathed. He was a young fellow, wearing the uniform of a common soldier of the line. He was unarmed, and his large bluish grey cloak was partly open, revealing his bare chest. The agents lifted him very carefully—for he groaned piteously at the slightest movement—and placed him in an upright position, with his back leaning against the wall. He soon opened his eyes, and in a faint voice asked for something to drink. They brought him a glass of water, which he drank with evident satisfaction. He then drew a long breath, and seemed to regain some little strength.

"Where are you wounded?" asked Gévrol.

"In the head, there," he responded, trying to raise one of his arms. "Oh! how I suffer."

The police-agent, who had cut off the murderer's retreat now approached, and with a dexterity that an old surgeon might have envied, made an examination of the gaping wound which the young man had received in the back of the neck. "It is nothing," declared the police-agent, but as he spoke there was no mistaking the movement of his lower lip. It was evident that he considered the wound very dangerous, probably mortal.

"It will be nothing," affirmed Gévrol in his turn; "wounds in the head, when they do not kill at once, are cured in a month."

The wounded man smiled sadly. "I have received my death blow," he murmured.

"Nonsense!"

"Oh! it is useless to say anything; I feel it, but I do not complain. I have only received my just deserts."

All the police-agents turned towards the murderer on hearing these words, presuming that he would take advantage of this opportunity to repeat his protestations of innocence. But their expectations were disappointed; he did not speak, although he must certainly have heard the words.

"It was that brigand, Lacheneur, who enticed me here," continued the wounded man, in a voice that was growing fainter.

"Lacheneur?"

"Yes, Jean Lacheneur, a former actor, who knew me when I was rich—for I had a fortune, but I spent it all; I wished to amuse myself. He, knowing I was without a single sou in the world, came and promised me money enough to begin life over again. Fool that I was to believe him, for he brought me to die here like a dog! Oh! I will have my revenge on him!" At this thought the wounded man clenched his hands threateningly. "I will have my revenge," he resumed. "I know much more than he believes. I will reveal everything."

But he had presumed too much upon his strength. Anger had given him

a moment's energy, but at the cost of his life which was ebbing away. When he again tried to speak, he could not. Twice did he open his lips, but only a choking cry of impotent rage escaped them. This was his last manifestation of intelligence. A bloody foam gathered upon his lips, his eyes rolled back in their sockets, his body stiffened, and he fell face downward in a terrible convulsion.

"It is over," murmured Gévrol.

"Not yet," replied the young police-agent, who had shown himself so efficient; "but he cannot live more than two minutes. Poor devil! he will say nothing."

The inspector of police had risen from the floor as if he had just witnessed the commonest incident in the world, and was carefully dusting the knees of his trousers. "Oh, well," he responded, "we shall know all we need to know. This fellow is a soldier, and the number of his regiment will be given on the buttons of his cloak."

A slight smile curved the lips of the subordinate. "I think you are mistaken, General," said he.

"How—"

"Yes, I understand. Seeing him attired in a military coat, you supposed— But no; this poor wretch was no soldier. Do you wish for an immediate proof? Is his hair the regulation cut? Where did you ever see soldiers with their hair falling over their shoulders?"

This objection silenced the General for a moment; but he replied, brusquely: "Do you think that I keep my eyes in my pocket? What you have remarked did not escape my notice; only I said to myself, here is a young man who has profited by leave of absence to visit the wig-maker."

"At least—"

But Gévrol would permit no more interruptions. "Enough talk," he declared. "We will now hear what has happened. Mother Chupin, the old hussy, is not dead!"

As he spoke, he advanced towards the old woman, who was still crouching upon the stairs. She had not moved nor ventured so much as a look, since the entrance of the police, but her moans had not been discontinued. With a sudden movement, Gévrol tore off the apron which she had thrown over her head, and there she stood, such as years, vice, poverty, and drink had made her; wrinkled, shrivelled, toothless, and haggard, her skin as yellow and as dry as parchment and drawn tightly over her bones.

"Come, stand up!" ordered the inspector. "Your lamentations don't affect me. You ought to be sent to prison for putting such vile drugs into your liquors thus breeding madness in the brains of your customers."

The old woman's little red eyes travelled slowly round the room, and then in tearful tones she exclaimed:—"What a misfortune! what will become of me? Everything is broken—I am ruined!" She only seemed impressed by the loss of her table utensils.

"Now tell us how this trouble began," said Gévrol.

"Alas! I know nothing about it. I was upstairs mending my son's clothes, when I heard a dispute."

"And after that?"

"Of course I came down, and I saw those three men that are lying there picking a quarrel with the young man you have arrested; the poor innocent! For he is innocent, as truly as I am an honest woman. If my son Polyte had been here he would have separated them; but I, a poor widow, what could I do! I cried 'Police!' with all my might."

After giving this testimony she resumed her seat, thinking she had said enough. But Gévrol rudely ordered her to stand up again. "Oh! we have not done," said he. "I wish for other particulars."

"What particulars, dear Monsieur Gévrol, since I saw nothing."

Anger crimsoned the inspector's ears, "What would you say, old woman, if I arrested you?"

"It would be a great piece of injustice."

"Nevertheless, it is what will happen if you persist in remaining silent. I have an idea that a fortnight in Saint-Lazare would untie your tongue."

These words produced the effect of an electric shock on the Widow Chupin. She suddenly ceased her hypocritical lamentations, rose, placed her hands defiantly on her hips, and poured forth a torrent of invective upon Gévrol and his agents, accusing them of persecuting her family ever since they had previously arrested her son, a good-for-nothing fellow. Finally, she swore that she was not afraid of prison, and would be only too glad to end her days in jail beyond the reach of want.

At first the General tried to impose silence upon the terrible termagant; but he soon discovered that he was powerless; besides, all his subordinates were laughing. Accordingly he turned his back upon her, and, advancing towards the murderer, he said:—"You, at least, will not refuse an explanation."

The man hesitated for a moment. "I have already said all that I have to say," he replied, at last. "I have told you that I am innocent; and this woman and a man on the point of death who was struck down by my hand, have both confirmed my declaration. What more do you desire? When the judge questions me, I will, perhaps, reply; until then do not expect another word from me."

It was easy to see that the fellow's resolution was irrevocable; and that he was not to be daunted by any inspector of police. Criminals frequently preserve an absolute silence, from the very moment they are captured. These men are experienced and shrewd, and lawyers and judges pass many sleepless nights on their account. They have learned that a system of defence cannot be improvised at once; that it is, on the contrary, a work of patience and meditation; and knowing what a terrible effect an apparently insignificant response drawn from them at the moment of detection may produce on a court of justice, they remain obstinately silent. So as to see whether the present culprit was an old hand or not, Gévrol was about to insist on a full explanation when someone announced that the soldier had just breathed his last.

"As that is so, my boys," the inspector remarked, "two of you will remain here, and I will leave with the others. I shall go and arouse the commissary of police, and inform him of the affair; he will take the matter in hand: and we can then do whatever he commands. My responsibility will be over, in any case. So untie our prisoner's legs and bind Mother Chupin's hands, and we will drop them both at the station-house as we pass."

The men hastened to obey, with the exception of the youngest among them, the same who had won the General's passing praise. He approached his chief, and motioning that he desired to speak with him, drew him outside the door. When they were a few steps from the house, Gévrol asked him what he wanted.

"I wish to know, General, what you think of this affair."

"I think, my boy, that four scoundrels encountered each other in this vile den. They began to quarrel; and from words they came to blows.

One of them had a revolver, and he killed the others. It is as clear as daylight. According to his antecedents, and according to the antecedents of the victims, the assassin will be judged. Perhaps society owes him some thanks."

"And you think that any investigation—any further search is unnecessary."

"Entirely unnecessary."

The younger man appeared to deliberate for a moment. "It seems to me, General," he at length replied, "that this affair is not perfectly clear. Have you noticed the murderer, remarked his demeanour, and observed his look? Have you been surprised as I have been—?"

"By what?"

"Ah, well! it seems to me—I may, of course, be mistaken—but I fancy that appearances are deceitful, and—Yes, I suspect something."

"Bah!—explain yourself, please."

"How can you explain the dog's faculty of scent?"

"Gévrol shrugged his shoulders. "In short," he replied, "you scent a melodrama here—a rendezvous of gentlemen in disguise, here at the Poivrière, at Mother Chupin's house. Well, hunt after the mystery, my boy; search all you like, you have my permission."

"What! you will allow me?"

"I not only allow you, I order you to do it. You are going to remain here with any one of your comrades you may select. And if you find anything that I have not seen, I will allow you to buy me a pair of spectacles."

II.

THE young police-agent to whom Gévrol abandoned what he thought an unnecessary investigation was a debutant in his profession. His name was Lecoq. He was some twenty-five or twenty-six years of age, almost beardless, very pale, with red lips, and an abundance of wavy black hair. He was rather short but well proportioned; and each of his movements betrayed unusual energy. There was nothing remarkable about his appearance, if we except his eyes, which sparkled brilliantly or grew extremely dull, according to his mood; and his nose, the large full nostrils of which had a surprising mobility.

The son of a respectable, well-to-do Norman family, Lecoq had received a good and solid education. He was prosecuting his law studies in Paris, when in the same week, blow following blow, he learned that his father had died, financially ruined, and that his mother had survived him only a few hours. He was left alone in the world, destitute of resources, obliged to earn his living. But how? He had an opportunity of learning his true value, and found that it amounted to nothing; for the university, on bestowing its diploma of bachelor, does not give an annuity with it. Hence, of what use is a college education to a poor orphan boy? He envied the lot of those who, with a trade at the ends of their fingers, could boldly enter the office of any manufacturer, and say:—"I would like to work." Such men were working and eating. Lecoq sought bread by all the methods employed by people who are in reduced circumstances! Fruitless labour! There are a hundred thousand people in Paris who have seen better days. No matter! He gave proofs of undaunted energy. He gave lessons, and copied documents for a lawyer. He made his appearance in a new character almost

every day, and left no means untried to earn an honest livelihood. At last he obtained employment from a well-known astronomer, the Baron Moser, and spent his days in solving bewildering and intricate problems, at the rate of a hundred francs a month.

But a season of discouragement came. After five years of constant toil, he found himself at the same point from which he had started. He was nearly crazed with rage and disappointment when he recapitulated his blighted hopes, his fruitless efforts, and the insults he had endured. The past had been sad, the present was intolerable, the future threatened to be terrible. Condemned to constant privations, he tried to escape from the horrors of his real life by taking refuge in dreams.

Alone in his garret, after a day of unremitting toil, assailed by the thousand longings of youth, Lecoq endeavoured to devise some means of suddenly making himself rich. All reasonable methods being beyond his reach, it was not long before he was engaged in devising the worst expedients. In short, this naturally moral and honest young man spent much of his time in perpetrating—in fancy—the most abominable crimes. Sometimes he himself was frightened by the work of his imagination: for an hour of recklessness might suffice to make him pass from the idea to the fact, from theory to practice. This is the case with all monomaniacs; an hour comes in which the strange conceptions that have filled their brains can be no longer held in check.

One day he could not refrain from exposing to his patron a little plan he had conceived, which would enable him to obtain five or six hundred francs from London. Two letters and a telegram were all that was necessary, and the game was won. It was impossible to fail, and there was no danger of arousing suspicion.

The astronomer, amazed at the simplicity of the plan, could but admire it. On reflection, however, he concluded that it would not be prudent for him to retain so ingenious a secretary in his service. This was why, on the following day, he gave him a month's pay in advance, and dismissed him, saying: "When one has your disposition, and is poor, one may either become a famous thief or a great detective. Choose."

Lecoq retired in confusion; but the astronomer's words bore fruit in his mind. "Why should I not follow good advice?" he asked himself. Police service did not inspire him with repugnance—far from it. He had often admired that mysterious power whose hand is everywhere, and which, although unseen and unheard, still manages to hear and see everything. He was delighted with the prospect of being the instrument of such a power. He considered that the profession of detective would enable him to employ the talents with which he had been endowed in a useful and honourable fashion; besides opening out a life of thrilling adventure with fame as its goal.

In short, this profession had a wonderful charm for him. So much so, that on the following week, thanks to a letter from Baron Moser, he was admitted into the service. A cruel disenchantment awaited him. He had seen the results, but not the means. His surprise was like that of a simple-minded frequenter of the theatre, when he is admitted for the first time behind the scenes, and is able to pry into the decorations and tinsel that are so dazzling at a distance.

However, the opportunity for which he had so ardently longed, for which he had been waiting during many weary months, had come, he thought, at last, as he reached the Poivrière with Gévrol and the other police-

agents. While he was clinging to the window shutters he saw by the light of his ambition a pathway to success. It was at first only a presentiment, but it soon became a supposition, and then a conviction based upon actual facts, which had escaped his companions, but which he had observed and carefully noted. He recognised that fortune had, at last, turned in his favour when he saw Gévrol neglect all but the merest formalities of examination, and when he heard him declare peremptorily that this triple murder was merely the result of one of those ferocious quarrels so frequent among vagrants in the outskirts of the city.

"Ah, well!" he thought; "have it your own way—trust in appearances, since you will see nothing beneath them! But I will prove to you that my youthful theory is better than all your experience."

The inspector's carelessness gave Lecoq a perfect right to secretly seek information on his own account; but by warning his superior officer before attempting anything on his own responsibility, he would protect himself against any accusation of ambition or of unduly taking advantage of his comrade. Such charges might prove most dangerous for his future prospects in a profession where so much rivalry is seen, and where wounded vanity has so many opportunities to avenge itself by resorting to all sorts of petty treason. Accordingly, he spoke to his superior officer—saying just enough to be able to remark, in case of success: "Ah! I warned you!"—just enough so as *not* to dispel any of Gévrol's doubts.

The permission which Lecoq obtained to remain in charge of the bodies was his first triumph—a triumph of the best possible augury; but he knew how to dissimulate, and it was in a tone of the utmost indifference that he requested one of his comrades to remain with him. Then, while the others were making ready to depart, he seated himself upon a corner of the table, apparently oblivious of all that was passing around. He did not dare to lift his head, for fear of betraying his joy, so much did he fear that his companions might read his hopes and plans in the expression of his face.

Inwardly he was wild with impatience. Though the murderer submitted with good grace to the precautions that were taken to prevent his escape, it required some time to bind the hands of the Widow Chupin, who fought and howled as if they were burning her alive. "They will never go!" Lecoq murmured to himself.

They did so at last, however. Gévrol gave the order to start, and left the house, addressing a laughing good-bye to his subordinate. The latter made no reply. He followed his comrades as far as the threshold to make sure that they were really going, for he trembled at the thought that Gévrol might reflect, change his mind, and return to solve the mystery, as was his right.

His anxiety was needless, however. The squad gradually faded away in the distance, and the cries of Widow Chupin died away in the stillness of the night. It was only then that Lecoq re-entered the room. He could no longer conceal his delight; his eyes sparkled as might those of a conqueror taking possession of some vast empire; he stamped his foot upon the floor and exclaimed with exultation: "Now the mystery belongs to us two alone!"

Authorised by Gévrol to choose one of his comrades to remain with him at the Poivrière, Lecoq had requested the least intelligent of the party to keep him company. He was not influenced by a fear of being obliged to share the fruits of success with his companion, but by the necessity of having an assistant from whom he could, in case of need, exact implicit obedience:

The comrade Lecoq selected was a man of about fifty, who, after a term of cavalry service, had become an agent of the prefecture. In the humble office that he occupied he had seen prefect succeed prefect, and might probably have filled an entire prison with the culprits he had arrested with his own hands. Experience had not, however, made him any the shrewder or any the more zealous. Still he had this merit, when he received an order he executed it with military exactitude, so far as he understood it. Of course if he had failed to understand it, so much the worse. It might, indeed, be said of him, that he discharged his duties like a blind man, like an old horse trained for a riding school.

When he had a moment's leisure, and a little money in his pocket, he invariably got drunk. Indeed, he spent his life between two fits of intoxication, without ever rising above a condition of semi-lucidity. His comrades had known, but had forgotten, his name, and his partiality for a certain beverage had accordingly induced them to call him "Father Absinthe."

With his limited powers of observation, he naturally did not observe the tone of triumph in his young companion's voice. "Upon my word," he remarked, when they were alone, "your idea of keeping me here was a good one, and I thank you for it. While the others spend the night paddling about in the slush, I shall get a good sleep."

Here he stood, in a room that was splashed with blood, that was shuddering so to speak with crime, and yet face to face with the still warm bodies of three murdered men he could talk of sleep!

But, after all, what did it matter to him? He had seen so many similar scenes in his time. And does not habit infallibly lead to professional indifference, making the soldier cool and composed in the midst of conflict, and rendering the surgeon impassible when the patient shrieks and writhes beneath his operating knife.

"I have been upstairs, looking about," pursued Father Absinthe; "I saw a bed up there, and we can mount guard here, by turns."

With an imperious gesture, Lecoq interrupted him. "You must give up that idea Father Absinthe," he said, "we are not here to sleep, but to collect information—to make the most careful researches, and to note all the probabilities. In a few hours the commissary of police, the legal physician, and the public prosecutor will be here. I wish to have a report ready for them."

This proposition seemed anything but pleasing to the old police-agent. "Eh! what is the use of that?" he exclaimed. "I know the General. When he goes in search of the commissary, as he has gone this evening, there is nothing more to be done. Do you think you can see anything that he didn't see?"

"I think that Gévrol, like everyone else, is liable to be mistaken. I think that he believes too implicitly in what seems to him evidence. I could swear that this affair is not what it seems so be; and I am sure that if we like we can discover the mystery which is concealed beneath present appearances."

Although Lecoq's vehemence was intense, he did not succeed in making any impression upon his companion, who, with a yawn that threatened to dislocate his jaws, replied: "Perhaps you are right; but I am going to bed. This need not prevent you from searching around, however; and if you find anything you can wake me."

Lecoq made no sign of impatience; nor in reality was he impatient. These words afforded him the opportunity for which he was longing. "You

will give me a moment first," he remarked. "In five minutes, by your watch, I promise to let you put your finger on the mystery that I suspect here."

"Well, go on for five minutes."

"After that you shall be free, Father Absinthe. Only it is clear that if I unravel the mystery alone, I alone ought to pocket the reward that a solution will certainly bring."

At the word "reward" the old police agent pricked up his ears. He was dazzled by the vision of an infinite number of bottles of the greenish liquor whose name he bore. "Convince me, then," said he, taking a seat upon a stool, which he had lifted from the floor.

Lecoq remained standing in front of him. "To begin with," he remarked, "whom do you suppose the person we have just arrested to be?"

"A porter, probably, or a vagabond."

"That is to say, a man belonging to the lowest class of society; consequently, a fellow without education."

"Certainly."

Lecoq spoke with his eyes fixed upon those of his companion. He distrusted his own powers, as is usual with persons of real merit, but he felt that if he could succeed in making his convictions penetrate his comrade's obtuse mind, their exactitude would be virtually proved.

"And now," he continued, "what would you say if I showed you that this young man had received an excellent, even refined education?"

"I should reply that it was very extraordinary. I should reply that—but what a fool I am! You have not proved it to me yet."

"But I can do so very easily. Do you remember the words that he uttered as he fell?"

"Yes, I remember them perfectly. He said; 'It is the Prussians who are coming.'"

"What do you suppose he meant by that?"

"What a question! I should suppose that he did not like the Prussians, and that he supposed he was offering us a terrible insult."

Lecoq was waiting anxiously for this response. "Ah, well; Father Absinthe," he said gravely, "you are wrong, quite wrong. And that this man has an education superior to his apparent position is proved by the fact that you did not understand his meaning, nor his intention. It was this single phrase that enlightened me."

Father Absinthe's physiognomy expressed the strange and comical perplexity of a man who is so thoroughly mystified that he knows not whether to laugh, or to be angry. After reflecting a little, he decided to adopt the latter course. "You are rather too young to impose upon an old fellow like me," he remarked. "I don't like boasters—"

"One moment!" interrupted Lecoq; "allow me to explain. You have certainly heard of a terrible battle which resulted in one of the greatest defeats that ever happened to France—the battle of Waterloo?"

"I don't see the connection—"

"Answer, if you please."

"Yes—then! I have heard of it!"

"Very well; you must know then that for some time victory seemed likely to rest with the banners of France. The English began to fall back, and the emperor already exclaimed: 'We have them!' when suddenly on the right, a little in the rear, a large body of troops was seen advancing, it was the Prussian army. The battle of Waterloo was lost."

In all his life, worthy Father Absinthe had never made such a strenuous effort to understand anything. In this case his perseverance was not wholly useless, for, springing from his stool, and probably in much the same tone that Archimédes cried "*Eureka!*" he exclaimed, "I understand. The man's words were only an allusion."

"It is as you have said," remarked Lecoq, approvingly. "But I had not finished. If the emperor was thrown into consternation by the appearance of the Prussians, it was because he was momentarily expecting the arrival of one of his own generals from the same direction—Grouchy—with thirty-five thousand men. So if this man's allusion was exact and complete, he was not expecting an enemy, but a friend. Now draw your own conclusions."

Father Absinthe was amazed but convinced: and his eyes, heavy with sleep a few moments before, now opened to their widest extent. "Good heavens!" he murmured, "if you put it in that way! But I forget; you must have seen something as you were looking through the shutters."

The young man shook his head. "Upon my honour," he declared, "I saw nothing save the struggle between the murderer and the poor devil dressed as a soldier. It was that sentence alone that aroused my attention."

"Wonderful! prodigious!" exclaimed the astonished old man.

"I will add that reflection has confirmed my suspicions. I ask myself why this man, instead of flying at once, should have waited and remained there, at that door, to parley with us."

With a bound, Father Absinthe sprang again to his feet. "Why?" he interrupted; "because he had accomplices, and he wished to give them time to escape. Ah! I understand it all now."

A triumphant smile parted Lecoq's lips. "That is what I said to myself," he replied, "and now it is easy to verify my suspicions. There is snow outside, isn't there?"

It was not necessary to say any more. The elder officer seized the light, and followed by his companion, he hastened to the back door of the house, which opened into a small garden. In this sheltered enclosure the snow had not melted, and upon its white surface the dark stains of numerous foot-prints presented themselves. Without hesitation, Lecoq threw himself upon his knees in the snow; he rose again almost immediately. "These indentations were not made by the men's feet," said he. "There have been women here."

III.

OBSTINATE men of Father Absinthe's stamp, who are at first always inclined to differ from other people's opinions, are the very individuals who end in madly adopting them. When an idea has at last penetrated their empty brains, they twist and turn it, dwell upon it, and develop it until it exceeds the bounds of reason.

Hence, the police veteran was now much more strongly convinced than his companion that the usually clever Gévrol had been mistaken, and accordingly he laughed the inspector to scorn. On hearing Lecoq affirm that women had taken part in the horrible scene at the Poivrière, his joy was extreme—"A fine affair!" he exclaimed; "an excellent case!" And suddenly recollecting a maxim that has been handed down from the time of Cicero, he added in sententious tones? "Who holds the woman holds the cause!"

Lecoq did not deign to reply. He was standing upon the threshold, leaning against the framework of the door, his hand pressed to his forehead, as motionless as a statue. The discovery he had just made, and which so delighted Father Absinthe, filled him with consternation. It was the death of his hopes, the annihilation of the ingenious structure which his imagination had built upon the foundation of a single sentence. There was no longer any mystery—, so celebrity was not to be gained by a brilliant stroke !

For the presence of two women in this vile den explained everything in the most natural and commonplace fashion. Their presence explained the quarrel, the testimony of Widow Chupin, the dying declaration of the pretended soldier. The behaviour of the murderer was also explained. He had remained to cover the retreat of the two women ; he had sacrificed himself in order to save them, an act of gallantry so common in the French character, that any scoundrel of the *barrières* might have performed it.

Still, the strange allusion to the battle of Waterloo remained unexplained. But what did that prove now ? Nothing, simply nothing. However, who could say how low an unworthy passion might cause a man even of birth and breeding to descend ? And the carnival afforded an opportunity for the parties to disguise themselves.

But while Lecoq was turning and twisting all these probabilities in his mind, Father Absinthe became impatient. "Are we going to remain here until doomsday ?" he asked. "Are we to pause just at the moment when our search has been productive of such brilliant results ?"

"Brilliant results !" These words stung the young man as deeply as the keenest irony could have done. "Leave me alone," he replied, gruffly ; "and, above all, don't walk about the garden, as by doing so, you'll damage any foot-prints."

His companion swore a little ; but soon became silent in his turn. He was constrained to submit to the irresistible ascendancy of superior will and intelligence.

Lecoq was engaged in following out his course of reasoning. "These are probably the events as they occurred," he thought. "The murderer, leaving the ball at the Rainbow, a dancing-house not far from here, near the fortifications, came to this wine-shop, accompanied by two women. He found three men drinking here, who either began teasing him, or who displayed too much gallantry towards his companions. He became angry. The others threatened him ; he was one against three ; he was armed ; he became wild with rage, and fired——"

He checked himself, and an instant after added, aloud : "But was it the murderer who brought these women here ? If he is tried, this will be the important point. It is necessary to obtain information regarding it.

He immediately went back into the house, closely followed by his colleague, and began an examination of the foot-prints round about the door that Gévrol had forced open. Labour lost. There was but little snow on the ground near the entrance of the hovel, and so many persons had passed in and out that Lecoq could discover nothing. What a disappointment after his patient hopes !

Lecoq could have cried with rage. He saw the opportunity for which he had sighed so long indefinitely postponed. He fancied he could hear Gévrol's coarse sarcasms. "Enough of this," he murmured, under his breath. "The General was right, and I am a fool !"

He was so positively convinced that one could do no more than discover

the circumstances of some commonplace, vulgar broil, that he began to wonder if it would not be wise to renounce his search and take a nap, while awaiting the coming of the commissary of police.

But Father Absinthe was no longer of this opinion. This worthy man, who was far from suspecting the nature of his companion's reflections could not explain his inaction. "Come ! my boy," said he, "have you lost your wits ? This is losing time, it seems to me. The authorities will arrive in a few hours, and what report shall we be able to give them ! As for me, if you desire to go to sleep, I shall pursue the investigations alone."

Disappointed as he was, the young police officer could not repress a smile. He recognised his own exhortations of a few moments before. It was the old man who had suddenly become intrepid. "To work, then !" he sighed, like a man who, whilst foreseeing defeat, wishes, at least, to have no cause for self-reproach.

He found it, however, extremely difficult to follow the foot-prints in the open air by the uncertain light of a candle, which was extinguished by the least breath of wind. "I wonder if there is a lantern in the house," he said. "If we could only lay our hands upon one !"

They searched everywhere, and, at last, upstairs in the Widow Chupin's own room, they found a well-trimmed lantern, so small and compact that it certainly had never been intended for honest purposes.

"A regular burglar's implement," said Father Absinthe, with a coarse laugh.

The implement was useful in any case ; as both men agreed when they returned to the garden and recommenced their investigations systematically. They advanced very slowly and with extreme caution. The old man carefully held the lantern in the best position, while Lecoq, on his knees, studied each foot-print with the attention of a chiromancer professing to read the future in the hand of a rich client. This new examination assured Lecoq that he had been correct in his first supposition. It was plain that two women had left the Poivrière by the back door. They had started off running, as was proved by the length of the steps and the shape of the foot-prints.

The difference in the tracks left by the two fugitives was so remarkable that it did not escape Father Absinthe's eyes. "Sapristi !" he muttered ; "one of these jades can boast of having a pretty foot at the end of her leg !"

He was right. One of the tracks betrayed a small, coquettish, slender foot, clad in an elegant high-heeled boot with a narrow sole and an arched instep. The other denoted a broad, short foot, growing wider towards the end. It had evidently been incased in a strong, low shoe.

This was indeed a clue. Lecoq's hopes at once revived ; so eagerly does a man welcome any supposition that is in accordance with his desires. Trembling with anxiety, he went to examine some other foot-prints a short distance from these ; and an excited exclamation at once escaped his lips.

"What is it ?" eagerly inquired the other agent ; "what do you see ?"

"Come and look for yourself, see there !" cried Lecoq.

The old man bent down, and his surprise was so great that he almost dropped the lantern. "Oh !" said he in a stifled voice, "a man's foot-print !"

"Exactly. And this fellow wore the finest of boots. See that imprint, how clear, how neat it is !"

Worthy Father Absinthe was scratching his ear furiously, his usual

method of quickening his rather slow wits. "But it seems to me," he ventured to say at last, "that this individual was not coming *from* this ill-fated hovel.

"Of course not; the direction of the foot tells you that. No, he was not going away, he was coming here. But he did not pass beyond the spot where we are now standing. He was standing on tip-toe with outstretched neck and listening ears, when, on reaching this spot, he heard some noise, fear seized him, and he fled."

"Or rather, the women were going out as he was coming, and—"

"No, the women were outside the garden when he entered it."

This assertion seemed far too audacious to suit Lecoq's companion, who remarked:—"One cannot be sure of that."

"I am sure of it, however; and can prove it conclusively. If you doubt it, it is because your eyes are growing old. Bring your lantern a little nearer—yes, here it is—our man placed his large foot upon one of the marks made by the woman with the small foot and almost effaced it." This unexceptionable piece of circumstantial evidence stupefied the old police-agent.

"Now," continued Lecoq, "could this man have been the accomplice whom the murderer was expecting? Might it not have been some strolling vagrant whose attention was attracted by the two pistol shots? This is what we must ascertain. And we will ascertain it. Come!"

A wooden fence of lattice-work, rather more than three feet high, was all that separated the Widow Chupin's garden from the waste land surrounding it. When Lecoq made the circuit of the house to cut off the murderer's escape he had encountered this obstacle, and, fearing lest he should arrive too late, he had leaped the fence to the great detriment of his pantaloons, without even asking himself if there was a gate or not. There was one, however—a light gate of lattice-work similar to the fence, turning upon iron hinges, and closed by a wooden button. Now it was straight towards this gate that these foot-prints in the snow led the two police-agents. Some new thought must have struck the younger man, for he suddenly paused. "Ah!" he murmured, "these two women did not come to the Poivrière this evening for the first time."

"Why do you think that, my boy?" inquired Father Absinthe.

"I could almost swear it. How, unless they were in the habit of coming to this den, could they have been aware of the existence of this gate? Could they have discovered it on such a dark, foggy night? No; for I, who can, without boasting, say that I have good eyes—I did not see it."

"Ah! yes, that is true!"

"These two women, however, came here without hesitating, in a straight line; and note that to do this, it was necessary for them to cross the garden diagonally."

The veteran would have given something if he could have found some objection to offer; but unfortunately he could find none. "Upon my word!" he exclaimed, "yours is a droll way of proceeding. You are only a conscript; I am a veteran in the service, and have assisted in more affairs of this sort than you are years old, but never have I seen—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Lecoq, "you will see much more. For example, I can prove to you that although the women knew the exact position of the gate, the man knew it only by hearsay."

"The proof!"

"The fact is easily demonstrated. Study the man's foot-prints,

who are very sharp, will see at once that he deviated greatly from the straight course. He was in such doubt, that he was obliged to search for the gate with his hand stretched out before him—and his fingers have left their imprint on the thin covering of snow that lies upon the upper railing of the fence.”

The old man would have been glad to verify this statement for himself, as he said, but Lecoq was in a hurry. “Let us go on, let us go on!” said he. “You can verify my assertions some other time.”

They left the garden and followed the foot-prints which led them towards the outer boulevards, inclining somewhat in the direction of the Rue de Patay. There was now no longer any need of close attention. No one save the fugitives had crossed this lonely waste since the last fall of snow. A child could have followed the track, so clear and distinct it was. Four series of foot-prints, very unlike in character, formed the track; two of these had evidently been left by the women; the other two, one going and one returning, had been made by the man. On several occasions the latter had placed his foot exactly on the foot-prints left by the two women, half effacing them, thus dispelling all doubt as to the precise moment of his approach.

About a hundred yards from the Poivrière, Lecoq suddenly seized his colleague's arm. “Halt!” he exclaimed, “we have reached a good place; I can see unmistakable proofs.”

The spot, all unenclosed as it was, was evidently utilised by some builder for the storage of various kinds of lumber. The ground was strewn with large blocks of granite, some chiselled, some in the rough, with numerous long planks and logs of wood in their midst. In front of one of these logs, the surface of which had been evidently wiped, all the various foot-prints came together, mingling confusedly.

“Here,” declared the young detective, “our fugitives met the man and took counsel with him. One of the women, the one with the little feet, sat down upon this log.”

“We ought to make quite sure of that,” said Father Absinthe, in an accented tone.

But his companion cut short his desire for verification. “You, my old friend,” said he, “are going to do me the kindness to keep perfectly still: pass me the lantern and do not move.”

Lecoq's modest tone had suddenly become so imperious that his colleague dared offer no resistance. Like a soldier at the command to halt, he remained erect, motionless, and mute, following his colleague's movements with an inquisitive, wondering eye.

Quick in his motions, and understanding how to manœuvre the lantern in accordance with his wishes, the young police-agent explored the surroundings in a very short space of time. A bloodhound in pursuit of his prey would have been less alert, less discerning, and less agile. He came and went, now turning, now pausing, now retreating, now hurrying on again without any apparent reason; he scrutinised, he questioned every surrounding object: the ground, the logs of wood, the blocks of stone, in a word, nothing escaped his glance. For a moment he would remain standing, then fall upon his knees, and at times lie flat upon his stomach with his face so near the ground that his breath must have melted the snow. He had drawn a tape-line from his pocket, and using it with a carpenter's dexterity, he measured, measured, and measured.

And all his movements were accompanied with the wild gestures of a mad-

man, interspersed with oaths or short laughs, with exclamations of disappointment or delight. After a quarter of an hour of this strange exercise, he turned to Father Absinthe, placed the lantern on a stone, wiped his hands with his pocket-handkerchief, and said: "Now I know everything!"

"Well, that is saying a great deal!"

"When I say everything, I mean all that is connected with the episode of the drama which ended in that bloody bout in the hovel. This expanse of earth covered with snow, is a white page upon which the people we are in search of have written, not only their movements, their goings, and comings, but also their secret thoughts, their alternate hopes and anxieties. What do these foot-prints say to you, Papa Absinthe? To me they are alive like the persons who made them; they breathe, speak, accuse!"

The old agent was saying to himself: "Certainly, this fellow is intelligent, undeniably shrewd; but he is very disagreeable."

"These are the facts as I have read them," pursued Lecoq. "When the murderer repaired to the Poivrière with the two women, his companion—I should say his accomplice—came here to wait. He was a tall man of middle age; he wore a soft hat and a shaggy brown overcoat; he was, moreover, probably married, or had been so, as he had a wedding-ring on the little finger of his right hand—"

His companion's despairing gestures obliged the speaker to pause. This description of a person whose existence had but just now been demonstrated, these precise details given in a tone of absolute certainty, completely upset all Father Absinthe's ideas, increasing his perplexity beyond all bounds.

"This is not right," he growled, "this is not kind. You are poking fun at me. I take the thing seriously; I listen to you, I obey you in everything, and then you mock me in this way. We find a clue, and instead of following it up, you stop to relate all these absurd stories."

"No," replied his companion, "I am not jesting, and I have told you nothing of which I am not absolutely sure, nothing that is not strictly and indisputably true."

"And you would have me believe—"

"Fear nothing, papa; I would not have you do violence to your convictions. When I have told you my reasons, and my means of information, you will laugh at the simplicity of the theory that seems so incomprehensible to you now."

"Go on, then," said the good man, in a tone of resignation.

"We had decided," rejoined Lecoq, "that the accomplice mounted guard here. The time seemed long, and growing impatient, he paced to and fro—the length of this log of wood—occasionally pausing to listen. Hearing nothing, he stamped his foot, doubtless exclaiming: 'What the deuce has happened to him down there!' He had made about thirty turns (I have counted them), when a sound broke the stillness—the two women were coming."

On hearing Lecoq's recital, all the conflicting sentiments that are awakened in a child's mind by a fairy tale—doubt, faith, anxiety, and hope—filled Father Absinthe's heart. What should he believe? what should he refuse to believe? He did not know. How was he to separate the true from the false among all these equally surprising assertions? On the other hand, the gravity of his companion, which certainly was not feigned, dismissed all idea of pleasantry.

Finally, curiosity began to torture him. "We had reached the point where the women made their appearance," said he.

"Yes, indeed," responded Lecoq, "but here all certainty ceases; no more proofs, only suppositions. Still, I have every reason to believe that our fugitives left the drinking den before the beginning of the fight, before the cries that attracted our attention. Who were they? I can only conjecture. I suspect, however, that they were not equals in rank. I am inclined to think that one was the mistress, the other her servant."

"That is proved," ventured the older man, "by the great difference in their feet and in their shoes."

This shrewd observation elicited a smile from Lecoq. "That difference," he replied, seriously, "is something of course; but it was not that which decided me in my opinion. If greater or less perfection of the extremities regulated social distinctions, many mistresses would be servants. What struck me was this: When the two women rushed wildly from Mother Chupin's house, the woman with the small feet sprang across the garden with one bound, she darted on some distance in advance of the other. The terror of the situation, the vileness of the den, the horror of the scandal, the thought of safety, inspired her with marvellous energy. But her strength, as often happens with delicate and nervous women, lasted only a few seconds. She was not half-way from the Poivrière when her speed relaxed, her limbs trembled. Ten steps farther on she tottered and almost fell. Some steps farther, and she became so exhausted that she let go her hold upon her skirts; they trailed upon the snow, tracing a faint circle there. Then the woman with the broad foot came to her aid. She seized her companion round the waist; she dragged her along; their foot-prints here are mingled confusedly; then, seeing that her friend was about to fall, she caught her up in her strong arms and carried her—for you will see that the foot-prints made by the woman with the small feet suddenly cease at this point."

Was Lecoq merely amusing himself by inventing this story? Was this scene anything but a work of the imagination? Was the accent of deep and sincere conviction which he imparted to his words only feigned?

Father Absinthe was still in doubt, but he thought of a way in which he might satisfy his uncertainty. He caught up the lantern and hurried off to examine these foot-prints which he had not known how to read, which had been speechless to him, but which had yielded their secret to another. He was obliged to agree with his companion. All that Lecoq had described was written there; he saw the confused foot-prints, the circle made by the sweeping skirts, the cessation of the tiny imprints.

On his return, his countenance betrayed a respectful and astonished admiration, and it was with a shade of embarrassment that he said: "You can scarcely blame an old man for being a little like St. Thomas. 'I have touched it with my fingers,' and now I am content to follow you."

The young police-agent could not, indeed, blame his colleague for his incredulity. Resuming his recital he continued: "Then the accomplice, who had heard the fugitives coming, ran to meet them, and he aided the woman with the large feet in carrying her companion. The latter must have been really ill, for the accomplice took off his hat and used it in brushing the snow off this log. Then, thinking the surface was not yet dry enough, he wiped it with the skirt of his overcoat. Were these civilities pure gallantry, or the usual attentions of an inferior? I have asked myself that question. This much, however, is certain, while the woman with the small feet

was recovering her strength, half-reclining upon this board, the other took the accomplice a little on one side, five or six steps away to the left, just beside that enormous block of granite. There she talked with him, and, as he listened, the man leant upon the snow-covered stone. His hand left a very distinct imprint there. Then, as the conversation continued, he rested his elbow upon the snowy surface."

Like all men of limited intelligence, Father Absinthe had suddenly passed from unreasoning distrust to unquestioning confidence. Henceforth, he could believe anything, for the very same reason that had, at first, made him believe nothing. Having no idea of the bounds of human reasoning and penetration, he saw no limits to the conjectural genius of his companion. With perfect faith, therefore, he inquired: "And what was the accomplice saying to the woman with the broad shoes?"

Lecoq smiled at this simplicity, but the other did not see him do so. "It is rather difficult for me to answer that question," replied the young detective, "I think, however, that the woman was explaining to the man the immensity and imminence of the danger that threatened his companion, and that they were trying to devise some means to rescue him from it. Perhaps she brought him orders given by the murderer. It is certain that she ended by beseeching the accomplice to run to the Poivrière and see what was passing there. And he did so, for his tracks start from this block of granite."

"And only to think," exclaimed Father Absinthe, "that we were in the hovel at that very moment. A word from Gévrol, and we might have had handcuffs on the whole gang! How unfortunate!"

Lecoq was not sufficiently disinterested to share his companion's regret. On the contrary, he was very thankful for Gévrol's blunder. Had it not been for that, how would he ever have found an opportunity of investigating an affair that grew more and more mysterious as his search proceeded, but which he hoped to fathom finally.

"To conclude," he resumed, "the accomplice soon returned, he had witnessed the scene, and was evidently afraid. He feared that the thought of exploring the premises might enter the minds of the police. It was to the lady with small feet that he addressed himself. He explained the necessity of flight, and told her that even a moment's delay might be fatal. At his words, she summoned all her energy; she rose and hastened away, clinging to the arm of her companion. Did the man indicate the route they were to take, or did they know it themselves? This much is certain, he accompanied them some distance, in order to watch over them. But besides protecting these women, he had a still more sacred duty to perform—that of succouring his accomplice, if possible. He retraced his steps, passed by here once more, and the last foot-print that I can discover leads in the direction of the Rue du Château-des-Rentiers. He wished to know what would become of the murderer, and went to place himself where he might see him pass by with his captors.

Like a dilettante who can scarcely restrain his applause until the close of the *aria* that delights him, Father Absinthe had been unable during the recital to entirely suppress his admiration. But it was not until Lecoq ceased speaking that he gave full vent to his enthusiasm, "Here is a detective if you like!" he exclaimed. "And they pretend that Gévrol is a shrewd! What has he ever done to compare with this? Ah! shall I tell you what I think? Why, in comparison with you, the General is a mere John the Baptist."

Certainly the flattery was gross, but it was impossible to doubt its sincerity. This was the first time that the balmy dew of praise had fallen upon Lecoq's vanity, and it greatly delighted him although he modestly replied, "Nonsense, you are too kind, papa. After all, what have I done that is so very clever? I told you that the man was of middle age. It was not difficult to see that after one had examined his heavy, dragging step. I told you that he was tall—an easy matter. When I saw that he had been leaning upon that block of granite there to the left, I measured the block in question. It is almost five feet five inches in height, consequently, a man who could rest his elbow upon it must be at least six feet high. The mark of his hand proves that I am not mistaken. On seeing that he had brushed away the snow which covered the plank, I asked myself what he had used; I thought that it might be his cap, and the mark left by the peak proves that I was right. Finally, if I have discovered the colour and the material of his overcoat, it is only because when he wiped the wet board, some splinters of the wood tore off a few tiny flakes of brown wool, which I have found, and which will figure in the trial. But what does this amount to, after all? Nothing. We have only discovered the first clues of the affair. Still, we are on the right scent—so, forward then!"

The old officer was electrified, and, like an echo, he repeated: "Forward!"

IV.

THAT night the vagabonds, who had taken refuge in the neighbourhood of the Poivrière, had a very bad time of it; for while those who managed to sleep were disturbed by frightful dreams of a police raid, those who remained awake witnessed some strange incidents, well calculated to fill their minds with terror. On hearing the shots fired inside Mother Chupin's drinking den, most of the vagrants concluded that there had been a collision between the police and some of their comrades, and they immediately began prowling about, eagerly listening and watching, and ready to take flight at the least sign of danger. At first they could discover no particular reasons for alarm. But later on, at about two o'clock in the morning, just as they were beginning to feel secure again, the fog lifted a little, and they witnessed a phenomenon well calculated to arouse anxiety.

Upon the unoccupied tract of land, which the people of the neighbourhood called the "plain," a small but very bright light was seen describing the most capricious evolutions. It moved here and there without any apparent aim, tracing the most inexplicable zig-zags, sometimes sinking to the earth, sometimes rising to a height of four or five feet, at others remaining quite motionless, and the next second flying off like a ball. In spite of the place and the season of the year, the less ignorant among the vagabonds believed the light to be some *ignis-fatuus*, one of those luminous meteors that rise from the marshes and float about in the atmosphere at the bidding of the wind. In point of fact, however, this *ignis-fatuus* was the lantern by the light of which the two police-agents were pursuing their investigations.

After thus suddenly revealing his capacity to his first disciple, Lecoq found himself involved in a cruel perplexity. He had not the boldness and promptness of decision which is the gift of a prosperous past, and was hesitating between two courses, both equally reasonable, and both

offering strong probabilities of success. He stood between two paths, that made by the two women on the one side, and that made by the accomplice on the other. Which should he take? For he could not hope to follow both. Seated upon the log where the women had rested a few moments before, with his hand pressed upon his forehead, he reflected and weighed the chances.

"If I follow the man I shall learn nothing that I do not know already. He has gone to hover round the party; he has followed them at a distance, he has seen them lock up his accomplice, and he is undoubtedly prowling round about the station-house. If I hurried in pursuit could I hope to overtake and capture him? No; too long a time has elapsed."

Father Absinthe listened to this monologue with intense curiosity, as anxious as an unsophisticated person who, having questioned a clairvoyant in regard to some lost articles, is waiting the oracle's response.

"To follow the women," continued the young man, "to what would that lead? Perhaps to an important discovery, perhaps to nothing."

However, he preferred the unknown, which, with all its chances of failure, had chances of success as well. He rose, his course was decided.

"Father Absinthe," said he, "we are going to follow the foot-prints of these two women, and wherever they lead us we will go."

Inspired with equal ardour they began their walk. At the end of the path upon which they had entered they fancied they observed, as in some magic glass, the one the fruits, the other the glory of success. They hurried forward. At first it was only play to follow the distinct foot-prints that led towards the Seine. But it was not long before they were obliged to proceed more slowly.

On leaving the waste ground they arrived at the outer limits of civilization, so to speak; and strange foot-prints mingled constantly with the foot-prints of the fugitives, at times even effacing them. In many spots, either on account of exposure or the nature of the soil, the thaw had completed its work, and there were large patches of ground entirely free from snow. In such cases they lost the trail, and it required all Lecoq's sagacity, and all his companion's good-will, to find it again.

On such occasions Father Absinthe planted his cane in the earth, near the last foot-print that had been discovered, and Lecoq and himself hunted all over the ground around this point, much after the fashion of a couple of bloodhounds, thrown off the scent. Then it was that the lantern moved about so strangely. More than a dozen times, in spite of all their efforts, they would have lost the clue entirely had it not been for the elegant shoes worn by the lady with the little feet. These had such small and extremely high heels that the impression they left could not be mistaken. They sank down three or four inches in the snow, or the mud, and their tell-tale impress remained as clear and distinct as that of a seal.

Thanks to these heels, the pursuers were able to discover that the two fugitives had not gone up the Rue de Patay, as might have been supposed. Probably they had considered this street too frequented, and too well lighted. They had only crossed it, just below the Rue de la Croix-Rouge, and had profited by an empty space between two houses to regain the open ground.

"Certainly these women were well acquainted with the locality," murmured Lecoq.

Indeed the topography of the district evidently had no secrets for them, for, on quitting the Rue de Patay, they had immediately turned to the right,

so as to avoid several large excavations, from which a quantity of brick clay had been dug.

But at last the trail was recovered, and the detectives followed it as far as the Rue du Chevaleret. Here the foot-prints abruptly ceased. Lecoq discovered eight or ten foot-marks left by the woman who wore the broad shoes, but that was all. Hereabouts, moreover, the condition of the ground was not calculated to facilitate an exploration of this nature. There had been a great deal of passing to and fro in the Rue du Chevaleret, and not merely was there scarcely any snow left on the footpaths, but the middle of the street was transformed into a river of slush.

"Did these people recollect at last that the snow might betray them? Did they take the middle of the road?" grumbled the young police-agent.

Certainly they could not have crossed to a vacant space as they had done just before, for on the other side of the street extended a long factory wall.

"Ah!" sighed Father Absinthe, "we have our labour for our pains."

But Lecoq possessed a temperament that refused to acknowledge defeat. Animated by the cold anger of a man who sees the object which he was about to seize disappear from before his eyes, he recommenced his search, and was well repaid for his efforts.

"I understand!" he cried suddenly, "I comprehend—I see!"

Father Absinthe drew near. *He* did not see nor divine anything! but he no longer doubted his companion's powers.

"Look there," said Lecoq; "what are those marks?"

"Marks left by the wheels of some carriage that plainly turned here."

"Very well, papa, these tracks explain everything. When they reached this spot, our fugitives saw the light of an approaching cab, which was returning from the centre of Paris. It was empty, and proved their salvation. They waited, and when it came nearer they hailed the driver. No doubt they promised him a handsome fare; this is indeed evident, since he consented to go back again. He turned round here; they got into the vehicle, and that is why the foot-prints go no further."

This explanation did not please Lecoq's companion. "Have we made any great progress now that we know that?" he asked.

Lecoq could not restrain an impulse to shrug his shoulders. "Did you expect that the tracks made by these fugitives would lead us through Paris and up to their very doors?" he asked.

"No; but—"

"Then what would you ask more? Do you think that I shall not know how to find this driver to-morrow? He was returning with his empty vehicle, his day's work was ended; hence, his stable is in the neighbourhood. Do you suppose that he will have forgotten that he took up two persons in the Rue du Chevaleret? He will tell us where he drove them; but that will not do us any good, for of course, they will not have given him their real address. But at all events he can probably give us a description of them, tell us how they were dressed, describe their appearance, their manner, and their age. And with that, and what we already know—"

An eloquent gesture expressed the remainder of his thought; then he added:—"We must now go back to the Poirrière, and go quickly. And you, my friend, may now extinguish your lantern."

While doing his best to keep pace with his companion, who was in such haste to get back to the Poirrière that he almost ran, Father Absinthe's thoughts were as busy as his legs, and an entirely new train of ideas was awakened in his mind.

During the twenty-five years that he had been connected with the police force, the good man—to use his own expression—had seen many of his colleagues walk over him and win, after only a few months' work, a promotion that his long years of service had not gained for him. In these cases he had not failed to accuse his superiors of injustice, and his fortunate rivals of gross flattery. In his opinion, seniority was the only claim to advancement—the only, the best, the most respectable claim; and he was won't to sum up all his opinions, all his grief and bitterness of mind in one phrase:—"It is infamous to pass over an old member of the service."

To-night, however, Father Absinthe discovered that there is something else in the world besides seniority, and that there might be good and sufficient reasons for what he had formerly regarded as favouritism. He secretly confessed that this new comer whom he had treated so carelessly, had just followed up a clue as he, veteran though he was, would never have succeeded in doing.

But communing with himself was not this good man's forte; he soon grew weary of reflection; and on reaching a place where they were obliged to proceed more slowly on account of the badness of the road, he deemed it a favourable opportunity to resume the conversation. "You are silent, comrade," he ventured to remark, "and one might swear that you were not exactly pleased."

This surprising result of the old man's reflections would have amazed Lecoq, if his mind had not been a hundred leagues away. "No, I am not pleased," he responded.

"And why, pray? Only ten minutes ago you were as gay as a lark."

"Then I did not see the misfortune that threatens us."

"A misfortune!"

"A very great misfortune. Do you not perceive that the weather has undesirably changed. It is evident that the wind is now coming from the south. The fog has disappeared, but the sky is cloudy and threatening. It will rain in less than an hour."

"A few drops are falling now; I just felt one."

These words produced on Lecoq much the same effect as a whip-up on a spirited horse. He sprang forward, and, adopting a still more hurried pace, exclaimed:—"Let us make haste! let us make haste!"

The old police-agent followed him as in duty bound; but his mind was, if possible, still more troubled by the replies of his young companion. A great misfortune! The wind from the south! Rain! He did not, he could not see the connection.

Greatly puzzled, and not a little anxious, Father Absinthe asked for an explanation, although he had but little more breath than was absolutely necessary to enable him to continue the forced march he was making. "Upon my word," said he, "I have racked my brains—"

His companion took pity on his anxiety. "What!" he exclaimed, as he still hastened forward, "you do not understand that our investigation, my success, and your reward, are dependent upon those black clouds which the wind is driving towards us!"

"Oh!"

"Twenty minutes of merely gentle rain, and our time and labour will be lost. If it rains, the snow will melt, and then farewell to our proofs. Let us get on—let us get on more quickly! You know very well that in such cases words don't suffice. If we declare to the public prosecutor that we have seen these foot-prints, he will ask, where? And what can we say!"

If we swear by all the gods that we have seen the foot-prints of a man and of two women, the investigating magistrate will say, 'Let me see them.' And who would feel sheepish then? Father Absinthe and Lecoq. Besides, Gévrol would not fail to declare that we were saying what was not true, in order to enhance our own value, and humiliate him."

"What an idea!"

"Faster, papa, faster; you will have all day to-morrow to be indignant. Perhaps it will not rain. In that case, these perfect, clear, and easily recognisable foot-prints will prove the culprits' ruin. How can we preserve them? By what process could we solidify them? I would deluge them with my blood if that could only cause them to congeal."

Father Absinthe was just then thinking that his share of the labour had hitherto been the least important; for he had merely held the lantern. But here was a chance for him to acquire a real and substantial right to the prospective reward. "I know a method," said he, "by which one could preserve these marks in the snow."

At these words the younger man stopped short, "You know—you?" he interrupted.

"Yes, I know," replied the old detective, with the evident satisfaction of a man who has gained his revenge. "They invented a way at the time of that affair at the Maison Blanche, last December."

"I recollect."

"Ah! well, on the snow in the court-yard there was a foot-print that attracted a detective's attention. He said that the whole evidence depended on that mark alone, that it was worth more than ten years' hard work in following up the case. Naturally, he desired to preserve it. They sent for a great chemist—

"Go on, go on."

"I have never seen the method put into practice, but an expert told me all about it, and showed me the mould they obtained. He explained it to me precisely, on account of my profession."

Lecoq was trembling with impatience. "And how did they obtain the mould?" he asked abruptly.

"Wait: I was just going to explain. They take some of the best gelatine, and allow it to soak in cold water. When it becomes thoroughly softened, they heat it until it forms a liquid, of moderate consistency. Then when it is just cool enough, they pour a nice little covering of it upon the foot-print.

Lecoq felt the irritation that is natural to a person who has just heard a bad joke, or who has lost his time in listening to a fool.

"Enough!" he interrupted, angrily. "That method can be found in all the manuals. It is excellent, no doubt, but how can it serve us? Have you any gelatine about you?"

"No."

"Nor have I. You might as well have counselled me to pour melted lead upon the foot-prints to fix them."

They continued their way, and five minutes later, without having exchanged another word, they re-entered the Widow Chupin's hovel. The first impulse of the older man would have been to rest to breathe, but Lecoq did not give him time to do so.

"Make haste: get me a dish—a plate—anything!" cried the young detective, "and bring me some water; gather together all the boards and old boxes you can find lying about."

While his companion was obeying him, Lecoq armed himself with a fragment of one of the broken bottles, and began scraping away furiously at the plastered wall that separated the two rooms. His mind disconcerted at first by the imminence of this unexpected catastrophe, a fall of rain, had now regained its equilibrium. He had reflected, he had thought of a way by which failure might possibly be averted—and he hoped for ultimate success. When he had accumulated some seven or eight handfuls of fine plaster-dust, he mixed one half with a little water so as to form a thin paste, leaving the rest untouched on the side of the plate.

"Now, papa," said he, "come and hold the light for me."

When in the garden, the young man sought for the deepest and most distinct of the foot-prints, knelt beside it, and began his experiment, trembling with anxiety. He first sprinkled upon the impression a fine coating of dry plaster, and then upon this coating, with infinite care, he poured his liquid solution drop by drop.

What luck! the experiment was successful! The plaster united in a homogeneous mass, forming a perfect model of the impression. Thus, after an hour's labour, Lecoq possessed half-a-dozen of these casts, which might, perhaps, be a little wanting in clearness of outline, but which were quite perfect enough to be used as evidence.

The young detective's alarm had been well founded, for it was already beginning to rain. Still, he had plenty of time to cover a number of the foot-prints, with the boxes and pieces of board, which Father Absinthe had collected, thus, placing them as it were beyond the reach of a thaw. Now he could breathe. The authorities might come; for the most important part of his task was completed.

V.

It was some distance from the Poivrière to the Rue du Chevaleret, even by way of the plain, and fully four hours had been occupied by Lecoq and his colleague in collecting their elements of information.

All this while, the Widow Chupin's abode had remained open, accessible to any chance visitor. Still, when, on his return, the young police-agent remembered this neglect of elementary precautions, he did not feel alarmed. Considering all the circumstances, it was very difficult to believe that any serious harm could have resulted from this carelessness.

For who would have been likely to visit this drinking-den after midnight? Its bad name served the purpose of a bulwark. The most daring vagrants did not drink there without some disquietude, fearing that if the liquor caused them to lose consciousness, they might be robbed or perhaps even murdered. Hence, if anyone had been attracted to this notoriously dangerous drinking-shop by the light that streamed through the open door, it could only have been some very reckless person returning late at night from the ball at the Rainbow, with a few sous left in his pocket. But, even then, a single glance inside would have sufficed to put the bravest to flight.

In less than a second the young police-agent had weighed all these possibilities, concerning which he did not breathe a word to Father Absinthe. When, little by little, the excitement caused by his successive hopes and disappointments, and by the accomplishment of the experiment with the foot-prints had died away, and he had regained his usual calm of mind, he

made a careful inspection of the abode, and was by no means satisfied with himself. He had experimented upon Father Absinthe with his new system of investigation, just as an aspiring orator tries his powers before his least gifted friends, not before the cleverest. He had certainly overwhelmed the old veteran by his superiority ; he had literally crushed him. But what great merit, what wonderful victory was this ? Why should he boast of having out-witted Father Absinthe, one of the least sagacious men in the service ?

If he could only have given some startling proofs of his energy or of his penetration ! But, after all, what had he accomplished ? Was the mystery solved ? Was his success more than problematical ? When one thread is drawn out, the skein is not untangled. This night would undoubtedly decide his future as a detective, so he swore that if he could not conquer his vanity, he would, at least, compel himself to conceal it. Hence, it was in a very modest tone that he said to his companion, "We have done all that we can do outside," said he, "now, would it not be wise to busy ourselves with the inside of the house ?"

Everything looked exactly in the same state as when the two men left the room. A candle, with a charred smoking wick, cast its flickering light upon the same scene of disorder, revealing to view the rigid features of the three victims. Without losing a moment, Lecoq began to pick up and study the various objects scattered over the floor. Some of these still remained intact. The Widow Chupin had recoiled from the expense of a tiled floor, judging the bare ground upon which the cabin was built quite good enough for the feet of her customers. This ground, which must originally have been well beaten down, had, by constant use and damp, become well-nigh as muddy as the soil outside.

The first fruits of Lecoq's search were a large salad-bowl, and a big iron spoon, the latter so twisted and bent that it had evidently been used as a weapon during the conflict. On inspecting the bowl, it became evident that when the quarrel began the victims were regaling themselves with the familiar mixture of water, wine, and sugar, known round about the *barrières* as *vin à la Française*. After the salad-bowl, the two men picked up five of the weighty glasses ordinarily used in wine-shops, and which, while looking as though they would contain half a bottle, are in point of fact so thick at the bottom that they hold next to nothing. Three of these glasses were broken, two were whole. All of them had contained wine—the same *vin à la Française*. This was plain, but for greater surety, Lecoq applied his tongue to the bluish mixture remaining in the bottom of each glass. "The deuce !" he muttered, with an astonished air.

Then he examined successively the surfaces of the three over-turned tables. Upon one of these, the one nearest the fire-place and the window, the still wet marks of the five glasses, of the salad-bowl, and even of the spoons could be distinguished. Lecoq very properly regarded this circumstance as a matter of the greatest importance, for it proved clearly enough that five persons had emptied the salad-bowl in company. Who were these five persons ?

"Oh ! oh !" suddenly exclaimed Lecoq in two entirely different tones. "Then the two women could not have been with the murderer !"

A very simple mode of discovery had presented itself to his mind. It was to ascertain if there were any other glasses, and what they had contained. After a fresh search on the floor, a sixth glass was found, similar in form to the others but much smaller. Its smell showed that it had con-

tained brandy. Then these two women had not been with the murderer, and therefore he could not have fought because the other men had insulted them. This discovery proved the inaccuracy of Lecoq's original suppositions. It was an unexpected check, and he was mourning over it in silence, when Father Absinthe, who had not ceased ferreting about, uttered a cry of surprise.

The young man turned ; he saw that his companion had become very pale. "What is it?" he asked.

"Some one has been here in our absence."

"Impossible!"

It was not impossible—it was true. When Gévrol had torn the apron off Widow Chupin's head he had thrown it upon the steps of the stairs ; neither of the police-agents had since touched it. And yet the pockets of this apron were now turned inside out ; this was a proof, this was evidence. At this discovery Lecoq was overcome with consternation, and the contraction of his features revealed the struggle going on in his mind. "Who could have been here?" he murmured. "Robbers? That is improbable."

Then, after a long silence which his companion took good care not to interrupt, he added : "The person who came here, who dared to penetrate into this abode and face the corpses of these murdered men—this person could have been none other than the accomplice. But it is not enough to suspect this, it is necessary to know it. I must—I will know it!"

They searched for a long time, and it was not until after an hour of earnest work that, in front of the door forced open by the police, they discovered in the mud, just inside the marks made by Gévrol's tread, a foot-print that bore a close resemblance to those left by the man who had entered the garden. They compared the impressions and recognized the same designs formed by the nails upon the sole of the boot.

"It must have been the accomplice!" exclaimed Lecoq. "He watched us, he saw us go away, and then he entered. But why? What pressing, irresistible necessity made him decide to brave such imminent danger?" He seized his companion's hand, nearly crushing it in his excitement: "Ah! I know why?" continued he, violently. "I understand only too well. Some article that would have served to throw light on this horrible affair had been left or forgotten, or lost here, and to obtain it, to find it, he decided to run this terrible risk. And to think that it was my fault, my fault alone, that this convincing proof escaped us! And I thought myself so shrewd! What a lesson! The door should have been locked; any fool would have thought of it—" Here he checked himself, and remained with open mouth and distended eyes, pointing with his finger to one of the corners of the room.

"What is the matter?" asked his frightened companion.

Lecoq made no reply, but slowly, and with the stiff movements of a somnambulist, he approached the spot to which he had pointed, stooped, picked up something, and said : "My folly is not deserving of such luck."

The object he had found was an earring composed of a single large diamond. The setting was of marvellous workmanship. "This diamond," declared Lecoq, after a moment's examination, "must be worth at least five or six thousand francs."

"Are you in earnest?"

"I think I could swear to it."

He would not have troubled about such a preamble as "I think" a few hours

before, but the blunder he had made was a lesson that would not be forgotten so long as he lived.

"Perhaps it was that same diamond earring that the accomplice came to seek," ventured Father Absinthe.

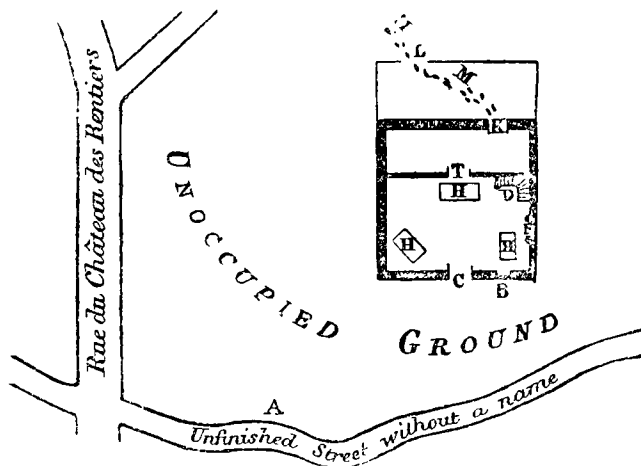
"The supposition is scarcely admissible. In that case, he would not have sought for it in Mother Chupin's apron. No, he must have been seeking for something else—a letter, for example."

The older man was not listening; he had taken the earring, and was examining it in his turn. "And to think," he murmured, astonished by the brilliancy of the stone, "to think that a woman who had ten thousand francs' worth of jewels in her ears should have come to the Poivrière. Who would have believed it?"

Lecoq shook his head thoughtfully. "Yes, it is very strange, very improbable, very absurd. And yet we shall see many things quite as strange if we ever arrive—which I very much doubt—at a solution of this mysterious affair."

Day was breaking, cold, cheerless, and gloomy, when Lecoq and his colleague concluded their investigation. There was not an inch of space that had not been explored, carefully examined and studied, one might almost say, with a magnifying glass. There now only remained to draw up the report.

The younger man seated himself at the table, and, with the view of making his recital as intelligible as possible, he began by sketching a plan of the scene of the murder.



A.—The point where the squad of police, under the command of Inspector Gévrol, heard the cries of the victims.

(The distance from this point to the wine-shop known as the Poivrière, is only one hundred and twenty-three yards; hence, it may reasonably be supposed that these cries were the first that were uttered, and consequently that the conflict had just commenced.)

B.—The window closed with shutters, through the cracks of which one of the police-agents was able to see the scene within.

C.—The door forced open by Inspector Gévrol.

D.—The staircase upon which the Widow Chupin was seated, crying.

(It was upon the third step of this staircase that the Widow Chupin's apron was afterwards found, the pockets turned inside out.)

F.—Fire-place.

HHH.—Tables.

(The remnants of the salad-bowl and of the five glasses were found scattered on the floor between the points F. and B.)

T.—Door communicating with the back room of the hovel, before which the armed murderer was standing with the table H. before him as a rampart.

K.—Back door of the hut, opening into the garden, by which the agent of police, who thought of cutting off the murderer's retreat, entered and secured him.

L.—Gate of the garden, opening upon the unoccupied ground.

MM.—Footprints on the snow, discovered by the police-agent remaining at the Poivrière, after the departure of Inspector Gérol.

It will be seen that in the memoranda appended to this explanatory diagram, Lecoq had not once written his own name. In noting the things that he had imagined or discovered, he referred to himself simply as one of the police. This was not so much modesty as calculation. By hiding one's self on well-chosen occasions, one gains greater notoriety when one emerges from the shade. It was also through cunning that he gave Gérol such a prominent position. These tactics, rather subtle, perhaps, but after all perfectly fair, could not fail to call attention to the man who had shown himself so efficient when the efforts of his chief had been merely confined to breaking open the door.

The document Lecoq drew up was not a *procès-verbal*, a formal act reserved for the officers of judiciary police; it was a simple report, that would be admitted under the title of an inquiry and yet the young detective composed it with quite as much care as a general would have displayed in drawing up the bulletin of his first victory.

While Lecoq was drawing and writing, Father Absinthe leaned over his shoulder to watch him. The plan amazed that worthy man. He had seen a great deal; but he had always supposed that it was necessary to be an engineer, an architect, or, at least, a carpenter, to execute such work. Not at all. With a tape-line with which to take some measurements, and a bit of board in place of a rule, his inexperienced colleague had soon accomplished the miracle. Father Absinthe's respect for Lecoq was thereby greatly augmented. It is true that the worthy veteran had not noticed the explosion of the young police-agent's vanity, nor his return to his former modest demeanour. He had not observed his alarm, nor his perplexity, nor his lack of penetration.

After a few moments, Father Absinthe ceased watching his companion. He felt weary after the labours of the night, his head was burning, and he shivered and his knees trembled. Perhaps, though he was by no means sensitive, he felt the influence of the horrors that surrounded him, and which seemed more sinister than ever in the bleak light of morning. He began to ferret in the cupboards, and at last succeeded in discovering—O, marvellous fortune!—a bottle of brandy, three parts full. He hesitated for an instant, then he poured out a glass, and drained it a single draught.

"Will you have some?" he inquired of his companion. "It is not a very famous brand, to be sure; but it is just as good, it makes one's blood circulate and enlivens one."

Lecoq refused; he did not need to be enlivened. All his faculties were hard at work. He intended that, after a single perusal of his report, the investigating magistrate should say: "Let the officer who drew up this document be sent for." It must be remembered that Lecoq's future depended upon such an order. Accordingly, he took particular care to be brief, clear, and concise, to plainly indicate how his suspicions on the subject of the murder had been aroused, how they had increased, and how they had

been confirmed. He explained by what series of deductions he had succeeded in establishing a theory which, if it was not the truth, was at least plausible enough to serve as the basis for further investigation.

Then he enumerated the articles of conviction ranged on the table before him. There were the flakes of brown wool collected upon the plank, the valuable earring, the models of the different foot-prints in the garden, and the Widow Chupin's apron with its pockets turned inside out. There was also the murderer's revolver, with two barrels discharged and three still loaded. This weapon, although not of an ornamental character, was still a specimen of highly-finished workmanship. It bore the name of one Stephens, 14 Skinner Street, a well-known London gunsmith.

Lecoq felt convinced that by examining the bodies of the victims he would obtain other, and perhaps very valuable information; but he did not dare venture upon such a course. Besides his own inexperience in such a matter, there was Gévrol to be thought of, and the inspector, furious at his own mistake, would not fail to declare that, by changing the attitude of the bodies, Lecoq had rendered a satisfactory examination by the physicians impossible.

The young detective accordingly tried to console himself for his forced inaction in this respect, and he was re-reading his report, modifying a few expressions, when Father Absinthe, who was standing upon the threshold of the outer door, called to him.

"Is there anything new?" asked Lecoq.

"Yes," was the reply. "Here come Gévrol and two of our comrades with the commissary of police and two other gentlemen."

It was, indeed, the commissary who was approaching, interested but not disturbed by this triple murder which was sure to make his arrondissement the subject of Parisian conversation during the next few days. Why, indeed, should he be troubled about it? For Gévrol, whose opinion in such matters might be regarded as an authority, had taken care to re-assure him when he went to arouse him from his slumbers.

"It was only a fight between some old offenders; former jail birds, habitués of the Poivrière," he had said, adding sententiously, "If all these ruffians would only kill one another, we might have some little peace."

He added that as the murderer had been arrested and placed in confinement, there was nothing urgent about the case. Accordingly, the commissary thought there was no harm in taking another nap and waiting until morning before beginning the inquiry. He had seen the murderer, reported the case to the prefecture, and now he was coming—leisurely enough—accompanied by two physicians, appointed by the authorities to draw up a medico-legal report in all such cases. The party also comprised a sergeant-major of the 53rd regiment of infantry of the line, who had been summoned by the commissary to identify, if possible, the murdered man who wore a uniform, for if one might believe the number engraved upon the buttons of his overcoat, he belonged to the 53rd regiment, now stationed at the neighbouring fort.

As the party approached it was evident that Inspector Gévrol was even less disturbed than the commissary. He whistled as he walked along, flourishing his cane, which never left his hand, and already laughing in his sleeve over the discomfiture of the presumptuous fool who had desired to remain to glean, where he, the experienced and skilful officer, had perceived nothing. As soon as he was within speaking distance, the inspector called to Father Absinthe, who, after warning Lecoq, remained

on the threshold, leaning against the door-post, puffing his pipe, as immovable as a sphinx.

"Ah, well, old man!" cried Gévrol, "have you any great melodrama, very dark and very mysterious, to relate to us?"

"I have nothing to relate myself," replied the old detective, without even drawing his pipe from his lips, "I am too stupid, that is perfectly understood. But Monsieur Lecoq will tell you something that will astonish you."

The prefix, "monsieur," which the old police-agent used in speaking of his colleague, displeased Gévrol so much that he pretended not to understand. "Who are you speaking of?" he asked abruptly.

"Of my colleague, of course, who is now busy finishing his report—of Monsieur Lecoq." Quite unintentionally, the worthy fellow had certainly become the young police-agent's god-father. From that day forward, for his enemies as well as for his friends, he was and he remained "Monsieur" Lecoq.

"Ah! ah!" said the inspector whose hearing was evidently impaired.

"Ah, he has discovered—"

"The pot of roses which others did not scent, General." By this remark, Father Absinthe made an enemy of his superior officer. But he cared little for that: Lecoq had become his deity, and no matter what the future might reserve, the old veteran had resolved to follow his young colleague's fortunes.

"We'll see about that," murmured the inspector, mentally resolving to have an eye on this youth whom success might transform into a rival. He said no more, for the little party which he preceded had now overtaken him, and he stood aside to make way for the commissary of police.

This commissary was far from being a novice. He had served for many years, and yet he could not repress a gesture of horror as he entered the Poivrière. The sergeant-major of the 53rd who followed him, an old soldier, decorated and medalled—who had smelt powder many scores of times—was still more overcome. He grew as pale as the corpses lying on the ground, and was obliged to lean against the wall for support. The two physicians alone retained their stoical indifference.

Lecoq had risen, his report in his hand; he bowed, and assuming a respectful attitude, was waiting to be questioned.

"You must have passed a frightful night," said the commissary, kindly; "and quite unnecessarily, since any investigation was superfluous."

"I think, however," replied the young police-agent, having recourse to all his diplomacy, "that my time has not been entirely lost. I have acted according to the instructions of my superior officer; I have searched the premises thoroughly, and I have ascertained many things. I have, for example, acquired the certainty that the murderer had a friend, possibly an accomplice, of whom I can give quite a close description. He must have been of middle age, and wore, if I am not mistaken, a soft cap and a brown woollen overcoat; as for his boots—"

"Zounds!" exclaimed Gévrol, and I—" He stopped short, like a man whose impulse had exceeded his discretion, and who would have gladly recalled his words.

"And you?" enquired the commissary, "Pray, what do you mean?"

The inspector had gone too far to draw back, and, unwittingly, was now obliged to act as his own executioner. "I was about to mention," he said, "that this morning, an hour or so ago, while I was waiting for you,

sir, before the station-house, at the Barrière d'Italie, where the murderer is confined, I noticed close by an individual whose appearance was not unlike that of the man described by Lecoq. This man seemed to be very intoxicated, for he reeled and staggered against the walls. He tried to cross the street, but fell down in the middle of it, in such a position that he would inevitably have been crushed by the first passing vehicle."

Lecoq turned away his head; he did not wish them to read in his eyes how perfectly he understood the whole game.

"Seeing this," pursued Gévrol, "I called two men and asked them to aid me in raising the poor devil. We went up to him; he had apparently fallen asleep: we shook him—we made him sit up; we told him that he could not remain there, but he immediately flew into a furious rage. He swore at us, threatened us, and began fighting us. And, on my word, we had to take him to the station-house, and leave him there to recover from the effects of his drunken debauch."

"Did you shut him up in the same cell with the murderer?" inquired Lecoq.

"Naturally. You know very well that there are only two cages in the station-house at the barrière—one for men and the other for women; consequently—"

The commissary seemed thoughtful. "Ah! that's very unfortunate," he murmured; "and there is no remedy."

"Excuse me, there is one," observed Gévrol, "I can send one of my men to the station-house with an order to detain the drunken man—"

Lecoq interposed with a gesture:—"Trouble lost," he said coldly. "If this individual is an accomplice, he has got sober by now—rest assured of that, and is already far away."

"Then what is to be done?" asked the inspector, with an ironical air. "May one be permitted to ask the advice of Monsieur Lecoq?"

"I think chance offered us a splendid opportunity, and we did not know how to seize it; and that the best thing we can do now is to give over mourning, and prepare to profit by the next opportunity that presents itself."

Gévrol was, however, determined to send one of his men to the station-house; and it was not until the messenger had started, that Lecoq commenced the reading of his report. He read it rapidly, refraining as much as possible from placing the decisive proofs in strong relief, reserving these for his own benefit; but so strong was the logic of his deductions, that he was frequently interrupted by approving remarks from the commissary and the two physicians.

Gévrol, who alone represented the opposition, shrugged his shoulders till they were well nigh dislocated, and grew literally green with jealousy.

"I think that you alone, young man, have judged correctly in this affair," said the commissary when Lecoq had finished reading. "I may be mistaken; but your explanations have made me alter my opinion concerning the murderer's attitude while I was questioning him (which was only for a moment). He refused, obstinately refused, to answer my questions, and wouldn't even give me his name."

The commissary was silent for a moment, reviewing the past circumstances in his mind, and it was in a serious tone that he eventually added: "We are, I feel convinced, in presence of one of those mysterious crimes, the causes of which are beyond the reach of human sagacity—this strikes me as being one of those enigmatical cases which human justice never can reach."

Lecoq made no audible rejoinder ; but he smiled to himself and thought, " We will see about that."

VI.

No consultation held at the bedside of a dying man ever took place in the presence of two physicians so utterly unlike each other as those who accompanied the commissary of police to the Poivriere.

One of them, a tall old man with a bald head, wearing a broad-brimmed hat, and an overcoat of antique cut, was evidently one of those modest *savants* encountered occasionally in the bye-ways of Paris—one of those healers devoted to their art, who too often die in obscurity, after rendering immense services to mankind. He had the gracious calmness of a man who, having seen so much of human misery, has nothing left to learn, and no troubled conscience could have possibly sustained his searching glance, which was as keen as his lancet.

His colleague—young, fresh-looking, light-haired, and jovial—was somewhat foppishly attired ; and his white hands were encased in handsome fur gloves. There was a soft self-satisfied smile on his face, and he had the manners of those practitioners who, for profit's sake, invariably recommend the infallible panaceas invented each month in chemical laboratories and advertised *ad nauseam* in the back pages of the newspapers. He had probably written more than one article upon "Medicine for the use of the people ;" puffing various mixtures, pills, ointments, and plasters for the benefit of their respective inventors.

"I will request you, gentlemen," said the commissary of police, "to begin your duties by examining the victim who wears a military costume. Here is a sergeant-major summoned to answer a question of identity, whom I must send back to his quarters as soon as possible."

The two physicians responded with a gesture of assent, and aided by Father Absinthe and another agent of police, they lifted the body and laid it upon two tables, which had previously been placed end to end. They were not obliged to make any note of the attitude in which they found the body, since the unfortunate man, who was still alive when the police entered the cabin, had been moved before he expired.

"Approach, sergeant," ordered the commissary, "and look carefully at this man."

It was with very evident repugnance that the old soldier obeyed.

"What is the uniform that he wears ?"

"It is the uniform of the 2nd battalion of the 53rd regiment of the line."

"Do you recognise him ?"

"Not at all."

"Are you sure that he does not belong to your regiment ?"

"I cannot say for certain : there are some conscripts at the *depôt* whom I have never seen. But I am ready to swear that he has never formed part of the 2nd battalion—which, by the way, is mine, and in which I am sergeant-major."

Lecoq, who had hitherto remained in the background, now stepped forward. "It might be as well," he suggested, "to note the numbers marked on the other articles of clothing."

"That is a very good idea," said the commissary, approvingly.

"Here is his shako," added the young police-agent. "It bears the number 3,129."

The officials followed Lecoq's advice, and soon discovered that each article of clothing worn by the unfortunate man bore a different number.

"The deuce!" murmured the sergeant; "there is every indication—But it is very singular."

Invited to consider what he was going to say, the brave trooper evidently made an effort to collect his intellectual faculties. "I would stake my epaulettes that this fellow never was a soldier," he said at last. "He must have disguised himself to take part in the Shrove Sunday carnival."

"Why do you think that?"

"Oh, I know it better than I can explain it. I know it by his hair, by his nails, by his whole appearance, by a certain *je ne sais quoi*; in short, I know it by everything and by nothing. Why look, the poor devil did not even know how to put on his shoes; he has laced his gaiters wrong side outwards." Evidently further doubt was impossible after this evidence, which confirmed the truth of Lecoq's first remark to Inspector Gévrol.

"Still, if this person was a civilian, how could he have procured this clothing?" insisted the commissary. "Could he have borrowed it from the men in your company?"

"Yes, that is possible; but it is difficult to believe."

"Is there no way by which you could ascertain?"

"Oh! very easily. I have only to run over to the fort and order an inspection of clothing."

"Do so," approved the commissary; "it would be an excellent way of getting at the truth."

But Lecoq had just thought of a method quite as convincing, and much more prompt. "One word, sergeant," said he, "isn't cast-off military clothing sold by public auction?"

"Yes; at least once a year, after the inspection."

"And are not the articles thus sold marked in some way?"

"Assuredly."

"Then see if there isn't some mark of the kind on this poor wretch's uniform."

The sergeant turned up the collar of the coat and examined the waist-band of the pantaloons. "You are right," he said, "these are condemned garments."

The eyes of the young police-agent sparkled. "We must then believe that the poor devil purchased this costume," he observed. "Where? Necessarily at the Temple, from one of the dealers in military clothing. There are only five or six of these establishments. I will go from one to another of them, and the person who sold these clothes will certainly recognise them by some trade mark."

"And that will assist us very much," growled Gévrol.

The sergeant-major, to his great relief, now received permission to retire, but not without having been warned that very probably the commissary would require his deposition.

The moment had come to search the garments of the pretended soldier, and the commissary, who performed this duty himself, hoped that some clue as to the man's identity would be forthcoming. He proceeded with his task, at the same time dictating to one of the men a *procès-verbal* of the search; that is to say, a minute description of all the articles he found upon the dead man's person. In the right hand trouser's pocket some tobacco, a pipe, and a few matches were found; in the left hand one, a linen handkerchief of good quality, but unmarked, and a soiled leather pocket-book, containing seven francs and sixty centimes.

There appeared to be nothing more ; and the commissary was expressing his regret, when, on carefully examining the pocket-book, he found a compartment which had at first escaped his notice being hidden by a leather flap. This compartment contained a carefully folded paper. The commissary unfolded it and read the contents aloud :

"My dear Gustave,—To-morrow, Sunday evening, do not fail to come to the ball at the Rainbow, according to our agreement. If you have no money pass by my house, and I will leave some with the concierge, who will give it to you.

Be at the ball by eight o'clock. If I am not already there, it will not be long before I make my appearance. Everything is going on satisfactorily.
"LACHENEUR."

Alas ! what did this letter reveal ? Only that the dead man's name was Gustave ; that he had some connection with a man named Lacheneur, who had advanced him money for a certain object ; and that they had met at the Rainbow some hours before the murder.

It was little—very little—but still it was something. It was a clue ; and in this absolute darkness even the faintest gleam of light was eagerly welcomed.

"Lacheneur !" growled Gévrol ; "the poor devil uttered that name in his last agony."

"Precisely," insisted Father Absinthe, "and he declared that he wished to revenge himself upon him. He accused him of having drawn him into a trap. Unfortunately, death cut his story short."

Lecoq was silent. The commissary of police had handed him the letter, and he was studying it with the closest attention. The paper on which it was written was of the ordinary kind : the ink was blue. In one of the corners was a half-effaced stamp, of which one could just distinguish the word—Beaumarchais.

This was enough for Lecoq. "This letter," he thought, "was certainly written in a café on the Boulevard Beaumarchais. In which one ? I must ascertain that point, for this Lacheneur must be found."

While the agents of the préfecture were gathered around the commissary, holding council and deliberating, the physicians began their delicate and disagreeable task. With the assistance of Father Absinthe, they removed the clothing of the pretended soldier, and then, with sleeves rolled up, they bent over their "subject" like surgeons in the schools of anatomy, and examined, inspected, and appraised him physically. Very willingly would the younger doctor have dispensed with these formalities, which he considered very ridiculous, and entirely unnecessary ; but the old physician had too high a regard for his profession, and for the duty he had been called upon to fulfil, to neglect the slightest detail. Minutely, and with the most scrupulous exactitude, he noted the height of the dead man, his supposed age, the nature of his temperament, the colour and the length of his hair, and the degree of development of his muscular system.

Then the doctors passed to an examination of the wound. Lecoq had judged correctly. The medical men declared it to be a fracture of the base of the skull. It could, they stated, only have been caused by some instrument with a very broad surface, or by a violent knock of the head against some hard substance of considerable magnitude.

But no weapon, other than the revolver, had been found ; and it was evi-

dently not heavy enough to produce such a wound. There must, then necessarily, have been a hand-to-hand struggle between the pretended soldier and the murderer; and the latter, seizing his adversary by the throat, had dashed him violently against the wall. The presence of some very tiny but very numerous spots of extravasated blood about the neck, made this theory extremely plausible.

No other wound, not even a bruise or a scratch, was to be found. Hence, it became evident that this terrible struggle must have been exceedingly short. The murder of the pretended soldier must have been consummated between the moment when the squad of police heard the shrieks of despair, and the moment when Lecoq peered through the shutter and saw the victim fall.

The examination of the other murdered men required different but even greater precautions than those adopted by the doctors in their inspection of the pseudo soldier. The position of these two victims had been respected; they were still lying across the hearth as they had fallen, and their attitude was a matter of great importance, since it might have decisive bearing on the case. Now, this attitude was such that one could not fail to be impressed with the idea that with both these men death had been instantaneous. They were both stretched out upon their backs, their limbs extended, and their hands wide open.

No contraction or extension of the muscles, no trace of conflict could be perceived; it seemed evident that they had been taken unawares, the more so as their faces expressed the most intense terror.

"Thus," said the old doctor, "we may reasonably suppose that they were stupefied by some entirely unexpected, strange, and frightful spectacle. I have come across this terrified expression depicted upon the faces of dead people more than once. I recollect noticing it upon the features of a woman who died suddenly from the shock she experienced when one of her neighbours, with the view of playing her a trick, entered her house disguised as a ghost."

Lecoq followed the physician's explanations, and tried to make them agree with the vague hypotheses that were revolving in his own brain. But who could these individuals be? Would they, in death, guard the secret of their identity, as the other victim had done?

The first subject examined by the physicians was over fifty years of age. His hair was very thin and quite grey and his face was closely shaven, excepting a thick tuft of hair on his rather prominent chin. He was very poorly clad, wearing a soiled woollen blouse and a pair of dilapidated trousers hanging in rags over his boots which were very much trodden down at the heels. The old doctor declared that this man must have been instantly killed by a bullet. The size of the circular wound, the absence of blood around its edge, and the blackened and burnt state of the flesh demonstrated this fact with almost mathematical precision.

The great difference that exists in wounds made by fire-arms, according to the distance from which the death-dealing missile comes, was seen when the physicians began to examine the last of the murdered men. The ball that had caused the latter's death had scarcely crossed a yard of space before reaching him, and his wound was not nearly so hideous in aspect as the other's. This individual, who was at least fifteen years younger than his companion, was short and remarkably ugly; his face, which was quite beardless, being pitted all over by the small-pox. His garb was such as is worn by the worst frequenters of the barrière. His trousers were of a grey

checked material, and his blouse turned back at the throat was blue. It was noticed that his boots had been blackened quite recently. The smart glazed cap that lay on the floor beside him was in harmony with his carefully curled hair and gaudy necktie.

These were the only facts that the physicians' report set forth in technical terms, this was the only information obtained by the most careful investigation. The two men's pockets were explored and turned inside out; but they contained nothing that gave the slightest clue to their identity, either as regards name, social position, or profession. There was not even the slightest indication on any of these points, not a letter, not an address, not a fragment of paper, nothing—not even such common articles of personal use, as a tobacco pouch, a knife, or a pipe which might be recognised, and thus establish the owner's identity. A little tobacco in a paper-bag, a couple of pocket-handkerchiefs that were unmarked, a packet of cigarettes—these were the only articles discovered beyond the money which the victims carried loose in their pockets. On this point, it should be mentioned that the elder man had sixty-seven francs about him, and the younger one, two louis.

Rarely had the police found themselves in the presence of so strange an affair, without the slightest clue to guide them. Of course, there was the fact itself, as evidenced by the bodies of the three victims; but the authorities were quite ignorant of the circumstances that had attended and of the motive that had inspired the crime. Certainly, they might hope with the powerful means of investigation at their disposal to finally arrive at the truth in the course of time, and after repeated efforts. But, in the meanwhile, all was mystery, and so strangely did the case present itself that it could not safely be said who was really responsible for the horrible tragedy at the Poivrière.

The murderer had certainly been arrested; but if he persisted in his obstinacy, how were they to ascertain his name? He protested that he had merely killed in self-defence. How could it be shown that such was not the case? Nothing was known concerning the victims; one of whom had with his dying breath accused himself. Then again, an inexplicable influence tied the Widow Chupin's tongue. Two women, one of whom had lost an earring valued at 5,000 francs, had witnessed the struggle—then disappeared. An accomplice, after two acts of unheard of audacity, had also made his escape. And all these people—the women, the murderer, the keeper of the saloon, the accomplice, and the victims—were equally strange and mysterious, equally liable *not* to be what they seemed.

Perhaps the commissary of police thought he would spend a very unpleasant quarter of an hour at the préfecture when he reported the case. Certainly, he spoke of the crime in a very despondent tone.

"It will now be best," he said at last, "to transport these three bodies to the Morgue. There they will doubtless be identified. He reflected for a moment, and then added: "And to think that one of these dead men is perhaps Lacheneur himself!"

"That is scarcely possible," said Lecoq. "The spurious soldier, being the last to die, had seen his companions fall. If he had supposed Lacheneur to be dead, he would not have spoken of vengeance."

Gévrol, who for the past two hours had pretended to pay no attention to the proceedings, now approached. He was not the man to yield even to the strongest evidence. "If Monsieur, the Commissary, will listen to me, he shall hear my opinion, which is a trifle more definite than M. Lecoq's fancies."

Before he could say any more, the sound of a vehicle stopping before the door of the cabin interrupted him, and an instant afterwards the investigating magistrate entered the room.

All the officials assembled at the Poivrière knew at least by sight the magistrate who now made his appearance, and Gévrol, an old habitué of the Palais de Justice, mechanically murmured his name: "M. Maurice d'Escorval."

He was the son of that famous Baron d'Escorval, who, in 1815, sealed his devotion to the empire with his blood, and upon whom Napoleon, in the Memorial of St. Helena, pronounced this magnificent eulogium: "Men as honest as he, may, I believe, exist; but more honest, no, it is not possible."

Having entered upon his duties as magistrate early in life, and being endowed with remarkable talents, it was at first supposed that the younger d'Escorval would rise to the most exalted rank in his profession. But he had disappointed all such prognostications by resolutely refusing the more elevated positions that were offered to him, in order to retain his modest but useful functions in the public prosecutor's office at Paris. To explain his repeated refusals, he said that life in the capital had more charms for him than the most enviable advancement in provincial centres. But it was hard to understand this declaration, for in spite of his brilliant connections and large fortune, he had, ever since the death of his eldest brother, led a most retired life, his existence merely being revealed by his untiring labours and the good he did to those around him.

He was now about forty-two years of age, but appeared much younger, although a few furrows already crossed his brow. One would have admired his face, had it not been for the puzzling immobility that marred its beauty, the sarcastic curl of his thin lips, and the gloomy expression of his pale-blue eyes. To say that he was cold and grave, did not express the truth, it was saying too little. He was gravity and coldness personified, with a shade of *hauteur* added.

Impressed by the horror of the scene the instant he placed his foot upon the threshold, M. d'Escorval acknowledged the presence of the physicians and the commissary by a slight nod of the head. The others in the room had no existence so far as he was concerned. At once his faculties went to work. He studied the ground, and carefully noted all the surroundings with the attentive sagacity of a magistrate who realises the immense weight of even the slightest detail, and who fully appreciates the eloquence of circumstantial evidence.

"This is a serious affair," he said, gravely; "very serious."

The commissary's only response was to lift his eyes to heaven. A gesture that plainly implied, "I quite agree with you!" The fact is, that for the past two hours the worthy commissary's responsibility had weighed heavily upon him, and he secretly blessed the investigating magistrate for relieving him of it.

"The public prosecutor was unable to accompany me," resumed M. d'Escorval, "he has not the gift of omnipresence, and I doubt if it will be possible for him to join me here. Let us, therefore, begin operations at once."

The curiosity of those present had become intense; and the commissary only expressed the general feeling when he said: "You have undoubtedly questioned the murderer, sir, and have learnt——"

"I have learnt nothing," interrupted M. d'Escorval, apparently much astonished at the interruption.

He took a chair and sat himself down, and while his clerk was busy in authenticating the commissary's *procès-verbal*, he began to read the report prepared by Lecoq.

Pale, agitated, and nervous, the young police-agent tried to read upon the magistrate's impassive face the impression produced by the document. His future depended upon the magistrate's approval or disapproval ; and it was not with a fuddled mind like that of Father Absinthe that he had now to deal, but with a superior intelligence.

"If I could only plead my own cause," he thought. "What are cold written phrases in comparison with spoken, living words, palpitating with emotion and imbued with the convictions of the speaker."

However, he was soon re-assured. The magistrate's face retained its immobility, but again and again did M. d'Escorval nod his head in token of approval, and occasionally some point more ingenious than the others extorted from his lips the exclamations : "Not bad !—very good !"

When he had finished the perusal he turned to the commissary and remarked : "All this is very unlike your report of this morning, which represented the affair as a low broil between a party of miserable vagabonds."

The observation was only too just and fair ; and the commissary deeply regretted that he had trusted to Gévrol's representations, and remained in bed. "This morning," he responded evasively, "I only gave you my first impressions. These have been modified by subsequent researches, so that—"

"Oh !" interrupted the magistrate, "I did not intend to reproach you, on the contrary, I must congratulate you. One could not have done better nor acted more promptly. The investigation that has been carried out shows great penetration and research, and the results are given with unusual clearness and wonderful precision."

Lecoq's head whirled.

The commissary hesitated for an instant. At first he was sorely tempted to confiscate this praise to his own profit. If he drove away the unworthy thought, it was because he was an honest man, and more than that, because he was not displeased to have the opportunity to do Gévrol a bad turn and punish him for his presumptuous folly.

"I must confess," he said with some embarrassment, "that the merit of this investigation does not belong to me."

"To whom, then, shall I attribute it—to the inspector?" thought M. d'Escorval, not without surprise, for having occasionally employed Gévrol, he did not expect from him such ingenuity and sagacity as was displayed in this report. "Is it you, then, who have conducted this investigation so ably?" he asked.

"Upon my word, no !" responded Inspector Gévrol. "I, myself, am not so clever as all that. I content myself with telling what I actually discover ; and I only give proofs when I have them in hand. May I be hung if the grounds of this report have any existence save in the brains of the man who imagined them." Perhaps the inspector really believed what he said, being one of those persons who are blinded by vanity to such a degree that, with the most convincing evidence before their eyes, they obstinately deny it.

"And yet," insisted the magistrate, "these women whose foot-prints have been detected must have existed. The accomplice who left the flakes of wool adhering to the plank is a real being. This earring is a positive, palpable proof."

Gévrol had hard work to refrain from shrugging his shoulders. "All this can be satisfactorily explained," he said, "without a search of twelve or fourteen hours. That the murderer had an accomplice, is possible. The presence of the women is very natural. Wherever there are male thieves, you will find female thieves as well. As for the diamond—what does that prove? That the scoundrels had just met with a stroke of good luck, that they had come here to divide their booty, and that the quarrel arose from the division."

This was an explanation, and such a plausible one, that M. d'Escorval was silent, reflecting before he announced his decision. "Decidedly," he declared at last, "decidedly, I adopt the hypothesis set forth in the report. Who prepared it?"

Gévrol's face turned red with anger. "One of my men," he replied, "a clever, adroit fellow, Monsieur Lecoq. Come forward, Lecoq, that the magistrate may see you."

The young man advanced, his lips tightly compressed so as to conceal a smile of satisfaction which almost betrayed itself. "My report, sir, is only a summary," he began, "but I have certain ideas—"

"Which you will acquaint me with, when I ask for them," interrupted the magistrate. And oblivious of Lecoq's chagrin, he drew from his clerk's portfolio two forms, which he filled up and handed to Gévrol, saying: "Here are two orders; take them to the station, where the murderer and the landlady of this cabin are confined, and have them conducted to the prefecture, where they will be privately examined."

Having given these directions, M. d'Escorval was turning towards the physicians, when Lecoq, at the risk of a second rebuff, interposed: "May I venture, sir, to beg of you to confide this mission to me?" he asked of the investigating magistrate.

"Impossible, I may have need of you here."

"I desired, sir, to collect certain evidence and an opportunity to do so may not present itself again."

The magistrate perhaps fathomed the young man's motive. "Then, let it be so," he replied, "but after your task is completed you must wait for me at the prefecture, where I shall proceed as soon as I have finished here. You may go."

Lecoq did not wait for the order to be repeated. He snatched up the papers, and hastened away.

He literally flew over the ground, and strange to say he no longer experienced any fatigue from the labours of the preceding night. Never had he felt so strong and alert, either in body or mind. He was very hopeful of success. He had every confidence in himself, and his happiness would indeed have been complete if he had had another judge to deal with. But M. d'Escorval overawed him to such a degree that he became almost paralyzed in his presence. With what a disdainful glance the magistrate had surveyed him! With what an imperious tone he had imposed silence upon him—and that, too, when he had found his work deserving of commendation.

"Still, never mind," the young detective mentally exclaimed, "no one ever tastes perfect happiness here below."

And concentrating all his thoughts on the task before him, he hurried on his way.

VII.

WHEN, after a rapid walk of twenty minutes, Lecoq reached the police station near the Barrière d'Italie, the door-keeper, with his pipe in his mouth, was pacing slowly to and fro before the guard-house. His thoughtful air, and the anxious glances he cast every now and then towards one of the little grated windows of the building sufficed to indicate that some very rare bird indeed had been entrusted to his keeping. As soon as he recognised Lecoq, his brow cleared, and he paused in his promenade.

"Ah, well!" he inquired, "what news do you bring?"

"I have an order to conduct the prisoners to the préfecture."

The keeper rubbed his hands, and his smile of satisfaction plainly implied that he felt a load the less on his shoulders.

"Capital! capital!" he exclaimed. The Black Maria, the prison van, will pass here in less than an hour; we will throw them in, and hurry the driver off—"

Lecoq was obliged to interrupt the keeper's transports of satisfaction. "Are the prisoners alone?" he inquired.

"Quite alone: the woman in one cell, and the man in the other. This has been a remarkably quiet night, for Shrove Sunday! Quite surprising indeed! It is true your hunt was interrupted."

"You had a drunken man here, however."

"No—yes—that's true—this morning, just at daybreak. A poor devil, who is under a great obligation to Gévrol."

The involuntary irony of this remark did not escape Lecoq. "Yes, under a great obligation, indeed!" he said with a derisive laugh.

"You may laugh as much as you like," retorted the keeper, "but such is really the case; if it hadn't been for Gévrol the man would certainly have been run over."

"And what has become of him?"

The keeper shrugged his shoulders. "You ask me too much," he responded. He was a worthy fellow who had been spending the night at a friend's house, and on coming out into the open air, the wine flew into his head. He told us all about it when he got sober, half-an-hour afterwards. I never saw a man so vexed as he was. He wept, and stammered: "The father of a family, and at my age too! Oh! it is shameful! What shall I say to my wife? What will the children think?"

"Did he talk much about his wife?"

"He talked about nothing else. He even mentioned her name—Eudisia Leocadie, or some name of that sort. He declared that he should be ruined if we kept him here. He begged us to send for the commissary to go to his house, and when we set him free, I thought he would go mad with joy; he kissed our hands, and thanked us again and again!"

"And did you place him in the same cage as the murderer?" inquired Lecoq.

"Of course."

"Then they talked with each other."

"Talked? Why, the drunkard was so 'gone' I tell you, that he couldn't

have said 'bread' distinctly. When he was placed in the cell, bang! he fell down like a log of wood. As soon as he recovered, we let him out. I'm sure, they didn't talk to each other."

The young police-agent had grown very thoughtful. "I was evidently right," he murmured.

"What did you say?" inquired the keeper.

"Nothing," replied Lecoq, who was not inclined to communicate his reflections to the custodian of the guard-house. These reflections of his were by no means pleasant ones. "I was right," he thought; "this pretended drunkard was none other than the accomplice. He is evidently an adroit, audacious, cool-headed fellow. While we were tracking his foot-prints he was watching us. When we had got to some distance, he was bold enough to enter the hovel. Then he came here and compelled them to arrest him; and thanks to an assumption of childish simplicity, he succeeded in finding an opportunity to speak with the murderer. He played his part perfectly. Still, I know that he did play a part, and that is something. I know that one must believe exactly the opposite of what he said. He talked of his family, his wife and children—hence, he has neither children, wife, nor family."

Lecoq suddenly checked himself, remembering that he had no time to waste in conjectures. "What kind of fellow was this drunkard?" he inquired.

"He was tall and stout, with full ruddy cheeks, a pair of white whiskers, small eyes, a broad flat nose, and a good-natured, jovial manner."

"How old would you suppose him to be?"

"Between forty and fifty."

"Did you form any idea of his profession?"

"It's my opinion, that what with his soft cap and his heavy brown overcoat, he must be either a clerk or the keeper of some little shop."

Having obtained this description, which agreed with the result of his investigations, Lecoq was about to enter the station-house when a sudden thought brought him to a stand-still. "I hope this man has had no communication with this Widow Chupin!" he exclaimed.

The keeper laughed heartily. "How could he have had any?" he responded. "Isn't the old woman alone in her cell? Ah, the old wretch! She has been cursing and threatening ever since she arrived. Never in my whole life have I heard such language as she has used. It has been enough to make the very stones blush; even the drunken man was so shocked that he went to the grating in the door, and told her to be quiet."

Lecoq's glance and gesture were so expressive of impatience and wrath that the keeper paused in his recital much perturbed. "What is the matter?" he stammered. "Why are you angry?"

"Because," replied Lecoq, furiously, "because——" Not wishing to disclose the real cause of his anger, he entered the station-house, saying that he wanted to see the prisoner.

Left alone, the keeper began to swear in his turn. "These police-agents are all alike," he grumbled. "They question you, you tell them all they desire to know; and afterwards, if you venture to ask them anything, they reply: 'nothing,' or 'because.' They have too much authority; it makes them proud."

Looking through the little latticed window in the door, by which the men on guard watch the prisoners, Lecoq eagerly examined the appearance of the assumed murderer. He was obliged to ask himself if this was really the same

man he had seen some hours previously at the Poivrière, standing on the threshold of the inner door, and holding the whole squad of police-agents in check by the intense fury of his attitude. Now, on the contrary, he seemed as it were the personification of weakness and despondency. He was seated on a bench opposite the grating in the door, his elbows resting on his knees, his chin upon his hand, his under lip hanging low and his eyes fixed upon vacancy.

"No," murmured Lecoq, "no, this man is not what he seems to be."

So saying he entered the cell, the culprit raised his head, gave the detective an indifferent glance but did not utter a word.

"Well, how goes it?" asked Lecoq.

"I am innocent!" responded the prisoner, in a hoarse, discordant voice.

"I hope so, I am sure—but that is for the magistrate to decide. I came to see if you wanted anything."

"No," replied the murderer, but a second later he changed his mind.

"All the same," he said, "I shouldn't mind a crust and a drink of wine."

"You shall have them," replied Lecoq, who at once went out to forage in the neighbourhood for eatables of some sort. In his opinion, if the murderer had asked for a drink after at first refusing to partake of anything, it was solely with the view of conveying the idea that he was really the kind of man he pretended to be.

At all events, whoever he might be, the prisoner ate with an excellent appetite. He then took up the large glass of wine that had been brought him, drained it slowly, and remarked. "That's capital! There can be nothing to beat that!"

This seeming satisfaction greatly disappointed Lecoq, who had selected, as a test, one of those horribly thick, bluish, nauseous mixtures, in vogue around the barriers—hoping, nay almost expecting, that the murderer would not drink it without some sign of repugnance. And yet the contrary proved the case. However, the young detective had no time to ponder over the circumstance, for a rumble of wheels now announced the approach of that lugubrious vehicle, the Black Maria.

When the Widow Chupin was removed from her cell she fought and scratched and cried "Murder!" at the top of her voice; and it was only by sheer force that she was at length got into the van. Then it was that the officials turned to the assassin. Lecoq certainly expected some sign of repugnance now, and he watched the prisoner closely. But he was again doomed to disappointment. The culprit entered the vehicle in the most unconcerned manner, and took possession of his compartment like one accustomed to it, knowing the most comfortable position to assume in such close quarters.

"Ah! what an unfortunate morning," murmured Lecoq, disconsolately.

"Still I will lie in wait for him at the préfecture."

When the door of the prison-van had been securely closed, the driver cracked his whip, and the sturdy horses started off at a brisk trot. Lecoq had taken his seat in front, between the driver and the guard; but his mind was so engrossed with his own thoughts that he heard nothing of their conversation, which was very jovial, although frequently interrupted by the shrill voice of the Widow Chupin, who sang and yelled her imprecations alternately.

It is needless, however, to recapitulate her oaths; let us rather follow the train of Lecoq's meditation. By what means could he secure some clue to the murderer's identity? He was still convinced that the prisoner must

belong to the higher ranks of society. After all, it was not so extraordinary that he should have succeeded in feigning an appetite, that he should have concealed his distaste for a nauseous beverage, and that he should have entered the Black Maria without hesitation. Such conduct was quite possible, indeed almost probable on the part of a man, endowed with considerable strength of will, and realising the imminence of his peril. But granting this, would he be equally able to hide his feelings when he was obliged to submit to the humiliating formalities that awaited him—formalities which in certain cases can, and must be, pushed even to the verge of insult and outrage?

No; Lecoq could not believe that this would be possible. He felt sure that the disgraceful position in which the prisoner would find himself, would cause him to revolt, to lose his self-control, to utter some word that might give the desired clue.

It was not until the gloomy vehicle had turned off the Pont Neuf on to the Quai de l'Horloge, that the young detective became conscious of what was transpiring around him. Soon the van passed through an open gateway, and drew up in a small, damp court-yard.

Lecoq immediately alighted, and opened the door of the compartment in which the supposed murderer was confined, exclaiming, as he did so "Here we are, get out." There was no fear of the prisoner escaping. The iron gate had been closed, and at least a dozen agents were standing near at hand, waiting to have a look at the new arrivals.

The prisoner slowly stepped to the ground. His expression of face remained unchanged, and each gesture evinced the perfect indifference of a man accustomed to such ordeals.

Lecoq scrutinized his demeanour as attentively as an anatomist might have watched the action of a muscle. He noted that the prisoner seemed to experience a sensation of satisfaction directly his foot touched the pavement of the court-yard, that he drew a long breath, and then stretched and shook himself, as if to regain the elasticity of his limbs, cramped by confinement in the narrow compartment from which he had just emerged. Then he glanced around him, and a scarcely perceptible smile played upon his lips. One might have sworn that the place was familiar to him, that he was well acquainted with these high grim walls, these grated windows, these heavy doors—in short, with all the sinister belongings of a prison.

"Good Lord!" murmured Lecoq, greatly chagrined, "does he indeed recognize the place?"

And his sense of disappointment and disquietude increased when, without waiting for a word, a motion, or a sign, the prisoner turned towards one of the five or six doors that opened into the court-yard. Without an instant's hesitation he walked straight towards the very doorway he was expected to enter—Lecoq asked himself, was it chance? But his amazement and disappointment increased tenfold when, after entering the gloomy corridor, he saw the culprit proceed some little distance, resolutely turn to the left, pass by the keeper's room, and finally enter the registrar's office. An old offender could not have done better.

Big drops of perspiration stood on Lecoq's forehead. "This man," thought he, "has certainly been here before; he knows the ropes."

The registrar's office was a large room heated almost to suffocation by an immense stove, and badly lighted by three small windows, the panes of which were covered with a thick coating of dust. There sat the clerk reading a newspaper, spread out over the open register—that fatal book in

which are inscribed the names of all those whom misconduct, crime, misfortune, madness, or error have brought to these grim portals.

Three or four attendants, who were awaiting the hour for entering upon their duties, reclined half asleep upon the wooden benches that lined three sides of the room. These benches, with a couple of tables, and some dilapidated chairs, constituted the entire furniture of the office, in one corner of which stood a measuring machine, under which each culprit was obliged to pass; the exact height of the prisoners being recorded in order that the description of their persons might be complete in every respect.

At the entrance of the culprit accompanied by Lecoq, the clerk raised his head. "Ah!" said he, "has the van arrived?"

"Yes," responded Lecoq. And showing the orders signed by M. d'Escorval, he added: "Here are this man's papers."

The registrar took the documents and read them. "Oh!" he exclaimed, "a triple assassination! oh! oh!" The glance he gave the prisoner was positively deferential. This was no common culprit, no ordinary vagabond, no vulgar thief.

"The investigating magistrate orders a private examination," continued the clerk, "and I must get the prisoner other clothing, as the things he is wearing now will be used as evidence. Let someone go at once and tell the superintendent that the other occupants of the van must wait."

At this moment, the governor of the Dépôt entered the office. The clerk at once dipped his pen in the ink, and turning to the prisoner he asked—"What is your name?"

"May."

"Your Christian name?"

"I have none."

"What, you have no Christian name?"

The prisoner seemed to reflect for a moment, and then answered, sulkily: "I may as well tell you that you need not tire yourself by questioning me. I shan't answer anyone else but the magistrate. You would like to make me cut my own throat, wouldn't you? A very clever trick, of course, but one that won't do for me."

"You must see that you only aggravate your situation," observed the governor.

"Not in the least. I am innocent; you wish to ruin me. I only defend myself. Get anything more out of me now, if you can. But you had better give me back what they took from me at the station-house. My hundred and thirty-six francs and eight sous. I shall need them when I get out of this place. I want you to make a note of them on the register. Where are they?"

The money had been given to Lecoq by the keeper of the station-house, who had found it upon the prisoner when he was placed in his custody. Lecoq now laid it upon the table. "Here are your hundred and thirty-six francs and eight sous," said he, "and also your knife, your handkerchief, and four cigars."

An expression of lively contentment was discernible on the prisoner's features.

"Now," resumed the clerk, "will you answer?"

But the governor perceived the futility of further questioning; and silencing the clerk by a gesture, he told the prisoner to take off his boots.

Lecoq thought the assassin's glance wavered as he heard this order. Was it only a fancy?

"Why must I do that?" asked the culprit.

"To pass under the beam," replied the clerk. "We must make a note of your exact height."

The prisoner made no reply, but sat down and drew off his heavy boots. The heel of the right one was worn down on the inside. It was, moreover, noticed that the prisoner wore no socks, and that his feet were coated with mud.

"You only wear boots on Sundays then?" remarked Lecoq.

"Why do you think that?"

"By the mud with which your feet are covered, as high as the ankle-bone."

"What of that?" exclaimed the prisoner, in an insolent tone. "Is it a crime not to have a marchioness's feet?"

"It is a crime you are not guilty of, at all events," said the young detective, slowly. "Do you think I can't see that if the mud were picked off, your feet would be white and neat? The nails have been carefully cut and polished—"

He paused. A new idea inspired by his genius for investigation had just crossed Lecoq's mind. Pushing a chair in front of the prisoner, and spreading a newspaper over it, he said: "Will you place your foot there?"

The man did not comply with the request.

"It is useless to resist," exclaimed the governor, "we are in force."

The prisoner delayed no longer. He placed his foot on the chair, as he had been ordered, and Lecoq, with the aid of a knife, proceeded to remove the fragments of mud that adhered to the skin.

Anywhere else, so strange and grotesque a proceeding would have excited laughter, but here, in this gloomy chamber, the ante-room of the assize-court, an otherwise trivial act is fraught with serious import. Nothing astonishes; and should a smile threaten to curve one's lips, it is instantly repressed.

All the spectators, from the governor of the prison to the keepers, had witnessed many other incidents equally absurd; and no one thought of inquiring the detective's motive. This much was known already; that the prisoner was trying to conceal his identity. Now it was necessary to establish it, at any cost, and Lecoq had probably discovered some means of attaining this end.

The operation was soon concluded; and Lecoq swept the dust off the paper into the palm of his hand. He divided it into two parts, inclosing one portion in a scrap of paper, and slipping it into his own pocket. With the remainder he formed a package which he handed to the governor, saying: "I must beg you, sir, to take charge of this, and to seal it up here, in presence of the prisoner. This formality is necessary, so that by and bye he may not pretend that the dust has been changed."

The governor complied with the request, and as he placed this "bit of proof" (as he styled it) in a small satchel for safe keeping, the prisoner shrugged his shoulders with a sneering laugh. Still, beneath this cynical gaiety Lecoq thought he could detect poignant anxiety. Chance owed him the compensation of this slight triumph; for previous events had deceived all his calculations.

The prisoner did not offer the slightest objection when he was ordered to undress, and to exchange his soiled and blood-stained garments for the clothing furnished by the government. Not a muscle of his face moved while he submitted his person to one of those ignominious examinations

which make the blood rush to the forehead of the lowest criminal. It was with perfect indifference that he allowed an inspector to comb his hair and beard, and to examine the inside of his mouth, so as to make sure that he had not concealed either some fragment of glass, by the aid of which captives can sever the strongest bars, or one of those microscopical bits of lead with which prisoners write the notes they exchange, rolled up in a morsel of bread, and called "postilions."

These formalities having been concluded, the superintendent rang for one of the keepers. "Conduct this man to No. 3 of the secret cells," he ordered.

There was no need to drag the prisoner away. He walked out, as he had entered, preceding the guard, like some old *habitué*, who knows where he is going.

"What a rascal!" exclaimed the clerk.

"Then you think—" began Lecoq, baffled but not convinced.

"Ah! there can be no doubt of it," declared the governor. "This man is certainly a dangerous criminal—an old offender—I think I have seen him before—I could almost swear to it."

Thus it was evident these people with their long, varied experience, shared Gévrol's opinion; Lecoq stood alone. He did not discuss the matter—what good would it have done? Besides, the Widow Chupin was just being brought in.

The journey must have calmed her nerves, for she had become as gentle as a lamb. It was in a wheedling voice, and with tearful eyes, that she called upon these "good gentlemen" to witness the shameful injustice with which she was treated—she, an honest woman. Was she not the main-stay of her family (since her son Polyte was in custody, charged with pocket-picking) hence, what would become of her daughter-in-law, and of her grandson Toto, who had no one to look after them but her?

Still, when her name had been taken, and a keeper was ordered to remove her, nature re-asserted itself, and scarcely had she entered the corridor than she was heard quarreling with the guard.

"You are wrong not to be polite," she said; "you are losing a good fee, without counting many a good drink I would stand you when I get out of here."

Lecoq was now free until M. d'Escorval's arrival. He wandered through the gloomy corridors, from office to office, but finding himself assailed with questions by everyone he came across, he eventually left the *dépôt*, and went and sat down on one of the benches beside the quay. Here he tried to collect his thoughts. His convictions were unchanged. He was more than ever convinced that the prisoner was concealing his real social standing, but, on the other hand, it was evident that he was well acquainted with the prison and its usages.

He had also proved himself to be endowed with far more cleverness, than Lecoq had supposed. What self-control! What powers of dissimulation he had displayed! He had not so much as frowned whilst undergoing the severest ordeals, and he had managed to deceive the most experienced eyes in Paris.

The young detective had waited during nearly three hours, as motionless as the bench on which he was seated, and so absorbed in studying his case that he had thought neither of the cold nor of the flight of time, when a carriage drew up before the entrance of the prison, and M. d'Escorval alighted, followed by his clerk.

Lecoq rose and hastened, well-nigh breathless with anxiety, towards the magistrate.

"My researches on the spot," said this functionary, "confirm me in the belief that you are right. Is there anything fresh?"

"Yes, sir; a fact that is apparently very trivial, though in truth, it is of importance that—"

"Very well!" interrupted the magistrate. You will explain it to me by and bye. First of all, I must summarily examine the prisoners. A mere matter of form for to-day. Wait for me here."

Although the magistrate promised to make haste, Lecoq expected that at least an hour would elapse before he re-appeared. In this he was mistaken. Twenty minutes later, M. d'Escorval emerged from the prison without his clerk.

He was walking very fast, and instead of approaching the young detective, he called to him from some little distance. "I must return home at once," he said, "instantly, I cannot listen to you."

"But, sir—"

"Enough! the bodies of the victims have been taken to the Morgue. Keep a sharp look-out there. Then, this evening make—well—do whatever you think best."

"But, sir, I must—"

"To-morrow!—to-morrow, at nine o'clock, in my office in the Palais de Justice."

Lecoq wished to insist upon a hearing, but M. d'Escorval had entered, or rather, thrown himself into his carriage, and the coachman was already whipping up the horse.

"And to think that he's an investigating magistrate," panted Lecoq, left spell-bound on the quay. "Has he gone mad?" As he spoke, an uncharitable thought took possession of his mind. "Can it be," he murmured, "that M. d'Escorval holds the key to the mystery? Perhaps he wishes to get rid of me."

This suspicion was so terrible that Lecoq hastened back to the prison, hoping that the prisoner's bearing might help to solve his doubts. On peering through the grated aperture in the door of the cell, he perceived the prisoner lying on the pallet that stood opposite the door. His face was turned towards the wall, and he was enveloped in the coverlid up to his eyes. He was not asleep, for Lecoq could detect a strange movement of the body, which puzzled and annoyed him. On applying his ear instead of his eye to the aperture, he distinguished a stifled moan. There could no longer be any doubt. The death rattle was sounding in the prisoner's throat.

"Help! help!" cried Lecoq, greatly excited. "The prisoner is killing himself!"

A dozen keepers hastened to the spot. The door was quickly opened, and it was then ascertained that the prisoner, having torn a strip of binding from his clothes, had fastened it round his neck and tried to strangle himself with the assistance of a spoon that had been left him with his food. He was already unconscious, and the prison doctor, who immediately bled him, declared that had another ten minutes elapsed, help would have arrived too late.

When the prisoner regained his senses, he gazed around him with a wild, puzzled stare. One might have supposed that he was amazed to find himself still alive. Suddenly a couple of big tears welled from his swollen eyelids, and rolled down his cheeks. He was pressed with questions, but

did not vouchsafe so much as a single word in response. As he was in such a desperate frame of mind, and as the orders to keep him in solitary confinement prevented the governor giving him a companion, it was decided to put a straight waistcoat on him. Lecoq assisted at this operation, and then walked away, puzzled, thoughtful, and agitated. Intuition told him that all these mysterious occurrences concealed some terrible drama.

"Still, what can have occurred since the prisoner's arrival here?" he murmured. "Has he confessed his guilt to the magistrate, or what is his reason for attempting so desperate an act?"

VIII.

LECOQ did not sleep that night although he had been on his feet for more than forty hours, and had scarcely paused either to eat or drink. Anxiety, hope, and even fatigue itself, had imparted to his body the fictitious strength of fever, and to his intellect the unhealthy acuteness which is so often the result of intense mental effort.

He no longer had to occupy himself with imaginary deductions, as in former times when in the employ of his patron, the astronomer. Once again did fact prove stranger than fiction. Here was reality—a terrible reality personified by the corpses of three victims lying on the marble slabs at the Morgue. Still, if the catastrophe itself was a patent fact, its motive, its surroundings, could only be conjectured. Who could tell what circumstances had preceded and paved the way for this tragical *dénouement*?

It is true that all doubt might be dispelled by one discovery—the identity of the murderer. Who was he? Who was right, Gévrol or Lecoq? The former's views were shared by the officials at the prison; the latter stood alone. Again, the former's opinion was based upon formidable proof, the evidence of sight; whilst Lecoq's hypothesis rested only on a series of subtle observations and deductions, starting from a single sentence that had fallen from the prisoner's lips.

And yet Lecoq resolutely persisted in his theory, guided by the following reasons. He learnt from M. d'Escorval's clerk that when the magistrate had examined the prisoner, the latter not only refused to confess, but answered all the questions put to him in the most evasive fashion. In several instances, moreover, he had not replied at all. If the magistrate had not insisted, it was because this first examination was a mere formality, solely intended to justify the somewhat premature delivery of the order to imprison the accused.

Now, under these circumstances, how was one to explain the prisoner's attempt at self-destruction? Prison statistics show that habitual offenders do not commit suicide. When apprehended for a criminal act, they are sometimes seized with a wild frenzy and suffer repeated nervous attacks; at others they fall into a dull stupor, just as some gluttoned beast succumbs to sleep with the blood of his prey still dripping from his lips. However, such men never think of putting an end to their days. They hold fast to life, no matter how seriously they may be compromised. In truth, they are cowards.

On the other hand, the unfortunate fellow who, in a moment of frenzy, commits a crime, not unfrequently seeks to avoid the consequences of his act by self-destruction.

Hence, the prisoner's frustrated attempt at suicide was a strong argument

in favour of Lecoq's theory. This wretched man's secret must be a terrible one, since he held it dearer than life, since he had tried to destroy himself that he might take it unrevealed to the grave.

Four o'clock was striking when Lecoq sprang from his bed on which he had thrown himself without undressing; and five minutes later he was walking down the Rue Montmartre. The weather was still cold and muggy; and a thick fog hung over the city. But the young detective was too engrossed with his own thoughts to pay attention to any atmospheric unpleasantness. Walking with a brisk stride he had just reached the church of Saint Eustache, when a coarse, mocking voice accosted him with the exclamation, "Ah, ha! my fine fellow!"

He looked up and perceived Gévrol, who, with three of his men, had come to cast his nets round about the markets, whence the police generally return with a good haul of thieves and vagabonds.

"You are up very early this morning, Monsieur Lecoq," continued the inspector; "you are still trying to discover our man's identity, I suppose?"

"Still trying."

"Is he a prince in disguise, or only a marquis?"

"One or the other, I am quite certain."

"All right then. In that case you will not refuse us the opportunity to drink to your success."

Lecoq consented, and the party entered a wine-shop close by. When the glasses were filled, Lecoq turned to Gévrol and exclaimed, "Upon my word, General, our meeting will save me a long walk. I was going to the préfecture to request you, on M. d'Escorval's behalf, to send one of our comrades to the Morgue this morning. The affair at the Poivrière has been noised about, and all the world will be there, so he desires some officer to be present to watch the crowd and listen to the remarks of the visitors."

"All right; Father Absinthe shall be there when the doors open."

To send Father Absinthe where a shrewd and subtle agent was required was a mockery. Still Lecoq did not protest, for it was better to be badly served than to be betrayed; and he could at least trust Father Absinthe.

"It doesn't much matter," continued Gévrol; "but you should have informed me of this last evening. However, when I reached the préfecture you had gone."

"I had some work to do."

"Yes?"

"At the station-house near the Barrière d'Italie. I wanted to know whether the floor of the cell was paved or tiled." So saying, Lecoq paid the score, saluted his superior officer, and went out.

"Thunder!" exclaimed Gévrol, striking his glass violently upon the counter. "Thunder! how that fellow provokes me! He does not know the A B C of his profession. When he can't discover anything, he invents wonderful stories, and then misleads the magistrates with his high-sounding phrases, in the hope of gaining promotion. I'll give him advancement with a vengeance! I'll teach him to set himself above me!"

Lecoq had not been deceived. The evening before, he had visited the station-house where the prisoner had first been confined, and had compared the soil of the cell floor with the dust he had placed in his pocket; and he carried away with him, as he believed, one of those crushing proofs that often suffice to extort from the most obstinate criminal a complete confession.

If Lecoq was in haste to part company with Gévrol, it was because he was anxious to pursue his investigations still further, before appearing in M. d'Escorval's presence. He was determined to find the cab-driver who had been stopped by the two women in the Rue du Chevaleret; and with this object in view, he had obtained at the préfecture the names and addresses of all the cab-owners hiring between the road to Fontainebleau and the Seine.

His earlier efforts at investigation proved unsuccessful. At the first establishment he visited, the stable boys, who were not yet up, swore at him roundly. In the second, he found the grooms at work, but none of the drivers had as yet put in an appearance. Moreover, the owner refused to show him the books upon which are recorded—or should be recorded—each driver's daily engagements. Lecoq was beginning to despair, when at about half-past seven o'clock he reached an establishment just beyond the fortifications belonging to a man named Trigault. Here he learned that on Sunday night, or rather, early on Monday morning, one of the drivers had been accosted on his way home by some persons who succeeded in persuading him to drive them back into Paris.

This driver, who was then in the court-yard harnessing his horse proved to be a little old man, with a ruddy complexion, and a pair of small eyes full of cunning. Lecoq walked up to him at once.

"Was it you," he asked, "who, on Sunday night, or rather on Monday, between one and two in the morning, drove a couple of women from the Rue du Chevaleret into Paris?"

The driver looked up, and surveying Lecoq attentively, cautiously replied: "Perhaps."

"It is a positive answer that I want."

"Aha!" said the old man sneeringly, "you know two ladies who have lost something in a cab, and so——"

The young detective trembled with satisfaction. This man was certainly the one he was looking for: "Have you heard anything about a crime that has been committed in the neighbourhood?" he interrupted.

"Yes; a murder in a low wine-shop."

"Well then, I will tell you that these two women are mixed up in it, they fled when we entered the place. I am trying to find them. I am a detective; here is my card. Now, can you give me any information?"

The driver had grown very pale. "Ah! the wretches!" he exclaimed. "I am no longer surprised at the luck-money they gave me—a louis, and two five franc-pieces for the fare—thirty francs in all. Cursed money! If I hadn't spent it, I'd throw it away!"

"And where did you drive them!"

"To the Rue de Bourgogne. I have forgotten the number, but I should recognise the house."

"Unfortunately they would not have let you drive them to their own door."

"Who knows? I saw them ring the bell, and I think they went in just as I drove away. Shall I take you there?"

"Lecoq's sole response was to spring on to the box, exclaiming: 'Let us be off.'"

It was not to be supposed that the women who had escaped from the Widow Chupin's drinking den at the moment of the murder were utterly devoid of intelligence. Nor was it at all likely that these two fugitives, conscious as they were of their perilous situation, had gone straight to

their real home in a vehicle hired on the public highway. Hence, the driver's hope of finding them in the Rue de Bourgogne was purely chimerical. Lecoq was fully aware of this and yet he did not hesitate to jump on to the box and give the signal for starting. In so doing, he obeyed a maxim which he had framed in his early days of meditation—a maxim intended to assure his after fame and which ran as follows: "Always suspect that which seems probable; and begin by believing what appears incredible."

As soon as the vehicle was well under way, the young detective proceeded to ingratiate himself into the driver's good graces, being anxious to obtain all the information that this worthy was able to impart.

In a tone that implied that all trifling would be useless the cabmen cried, "Hey up, hey up, Cocotte!" and his mare pricked up her ears and quickened her pace, so that the Route de Choisy was speedily reached. Then it was that Lecoq resumed his inquiries.

"Well, my good fellow," he began, "you have told me the principal facts, now I should like to have the details. How did these two women attract your attention?"

"Oh, it was very simple. I had been having a most unfortunate day—six hours on a stand on the Boulevards, with the rain pouring all the time. It was simply awful. At midnight I had not made more than a franc and a half for myself, but I was so wet and miserable and the horse seemed so done up, that I decided to go home. I *did* grumble I can tell you. Well I had just passed the corner of the Rue Picard, in the Rue du Chevaleret, when I saw two women standing under a lamp, some little distance off. I did not pay any attention to them; for when a man is as old as I am, women——"

"Go on!" said Lecoq, who could not restrain his impatience.

"I had already passed them, when they began to call after me. I pretended I did not hear them; but one of them ran after the cab, crying: 'A louis! a louis for yourself!' I hesitated for a moment, when the woman added; 'And ten francs for the fare!' I then drew up."

Lecoq was boiling over with impatience; but he felt that the wisest course was not to interrupt the driver with questions, but to listen to all he had to say.

"As you may suppose," continued the coachman, "I wasn't inclined to trust two such suspicious characters, alone at that hour and in that part of the city. So, just as they were about to get into the cab, I called to them, 'Wait a bit, my little friends, you have promised papa some sous; where are they?' The one who had called after the cab at once handed me thirty francs, saying: 'Above all, make haste!'"

"Your recital could not be more minute," exclaimed Lecoq, approvingly. "Now, how about these two women?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what kind of women did they seem to be; what did you take them for?"

"Oh, for nothing very good!" replied the driver, with a knowing smile.

"Ah! and how were they dressed?"

"Like most of the girls who go to dance at the Rainbow. One of them, however, was very neat and prim, while the other—well! she was a terrible dowdy."

"Which one ran after you?"

"The girl who was neatly dressed, the one who——" The driver

suddenly paused: some vivid remembrance passed through his brain, and abruptly jerking the reins, he brought his horse to a stand-still.

"Thunder!" he exclaimed. "Now I think of it, I did notice something strange. One of the two women called the other 'madame,' as large as life, while the other said 'thee' and 'thou,' and spoke as if she were somebody."

"Oh! oh! oh!" exclaimed the young detective, in three different keys. "And which was it that said 'thee' and 'thou'?"

"Why, the dowdy one. She with the shabby dress and shoes as big as a gouty man's. You should have seen her shake the prim-looking girl, as if she had been a plum-tree. 'You little fool!' said she, 'do you want to ruin us. You will have time to faint when we get home; now come along!' And then the other began to sob, 'Indeed, madame, indeed I can't!' she said, and really she seemed quite unable to move: in fact, she appeared to be so ill that I said to myself: 'Here is a young woman who has drank more than is good for her!'"

These facts confirmed even if they corrected Lecoq's first suppositions. As he had suspected, the social position of the two women was not the same. He had been mistaken, however, in attributing the higher standing to the woman wearing the small shoes with the high heels, the marks of which he had so particularly noticed in the snow, with all the attendant signs of precipitation, terror, and weakness. In reality, social pre-eminence belonged to the woman who had left the large broad foot-prints behind her. And not merely was she of a superior rank, but she had also shown superior energy. Contrary to Lecoq's original idea, it now seemed evident that she was the mistress, and her companion the servant.

"Is that all, my good fellow!" he asked the driver, who during the last few minutes had been busy with his horse.

"Yes," replied the cabman, "except that I noticed that the shabbily dressed woman who paid me had a hand as small as a child's, and in spite of her anger, her voice was as sweet as music."

"Did you see her face?"

"I just caught a glimpse of it."

"Could you tell if she were pretty, or whether she was a blonde or a brunette?"

"So many questions at a time confused the driver. "Stop a minute!" he replied. "In my opinion she wasn't pretty, and I don't believe she was young, but she certainly was a blonde, and with plenty of hair too."

"Was she tall or short, stout or slender?"

"Between the two."

This was very vague. "And the other," asked Lecoq, "the neatly dressed one?"

"The deuce! As for her, I did not notice her at all; all I know about her is that she was very small."

"Would you recognize her if you met her again?"

"Good heavens! no."

The vehicle was now rolling along the Rue de Bourgogne. Half way down the street the driver pulled up, and turning to Lecoq exclaimed, "Here we are. That's the house the hussies went into."

To draw off the silk handkerchief that served him as a muffler, to fold it and slip it into his pocket, to spring to the ground and enter the house indicated, was only the work of an instant for the young detective.

In the concierge's little room he found an old woman knitting. Lecoq

bowed to her politely, and displaying the silk handkerchief exclaimed, "Madame, I have come to return this article to one of your lodgers."

"To which one?"

"Really, I don't exactly know."

In a moment the worthy dame imagined that this polite young man was making fun of her. "You scamp!"—she began.

"Excuse me," interrupted Lecoq; "allow me to finish. I must tell you that at about three o'clock in the morning, of the day before yesterday, I was quietly returning home, when two ladies who were seemingly in a great hurry, overtook me and passed on. One of them dropped this handkerchief which I picked up. I hastened after them to restore it, but before I could overtake them they had rang the bell at your door and were already in the house. I did not like to ring at such an unearthly hour for fear of disturbing you. Yesterday I was so busy I couldn't come; however, here I am at last, and here's the handkerchief." So saying, Lecoq laid the handkerchief on the table, and turned as if to go, when the concierge detained him.

"Many thanks for your kindness," said she, "but you can keep it. We have no ladies in this house, who are in the habit of coming home alone after midnight."

"Still, I have eyes," insisted Lecoq, "and I certainly saw—"

"Ah! I had forgotten," exclaimed the old woman. "The night you speak of someone certainly did ring the bell here. I pulled the string that opens the door and listened, but not hearing anyone close the door or come up-stairs, I said to myself: 'some mischievous fellow has been playing a trick on me.' I slipped on my dress and went out into the hall where I saw two women, hastening towards the door. Before I could reach them, they had slammed it in my face. I opened it again as quickly as I could and looked out into the street. But they were hurrying away as fast as they could."

"In what direction?"

"Oh! they were running towards the Rue de Varennes."

Lecoq was baffled again; however, he bowed civilly to the concierge, whom he might possibly have need of at another time, and then went back to the cab. "As I had supposed, they do not live here," he remarked to the driver.

The latter shrugged his shoulders in evident vexation, which would inevitably have found vent in a torrent of words, if Lecoq, who had consulted his watch, had not forestalled the outburst by saying: "Nine o'clock—I am an hour behind time already: still I shall have some news to tell. Now take me to the Morgue as quickly as possible."

When a mysterious crime has been perpetrated, or a great catastrophe has happened, and the identity of the victims has not been established, a "great day" invariably follows at the Morgue. The attendants are so accustomed to the horrors of the place, that the most sickly sight fails to impress them; and even under the most distressing circumstances, they hasten gaily to and fro, exchanging jests well calculated to make an ordinary mortal's flesh creep. As a rule, they are far less interested in the corpses laid out for public view on the marble slabs in the principal hall, than in the people of every age and station in life who congregate here all day long; at times coming in search of some lost relative or friend, but far more frequently impelled by idle curiosity.

As the vehicle conveying Lecoq reached the quay, the young detective

perceived that a large, excited crowd was gathered outside the building. The newspapers had reported the tragedy at the Widow Chupin's drinking den, of course, more or less correctly, and everybody wished to see the victims.

On drawing near the Pont Notre Dame, Lecoq told the driver to pull up. "I prefer to alight here, rather than in front of the Morgue," he said, springing to the ground. Then, producing first his watch, and next his purse, he added, "we have been an hour and forty minutes, my good fellow, consequently, I owe you—"

"Nothing at all," replied the driver, decidedly.

"But—"

"No—not a sou. I am too worried already to think that I took the money these hussies offered me. It would only have served me right if the liquor I bought with it had given me the gripes. Don't be uneasy about the score, and if you need a trap use mine for nothing, till you have caught the jades."

As Lecoq's purse was low, he did not insist.

"You will, at least, take my name and address?" continued the driver.

"Certainly. The magistrate will want your evidence, and a summons will be sent you."

"All right, then. Address it to Papillon (Eugène), driver, care of M. Trigault. I lodge at his place, because I have some small interest in the business, you see."

The young detective was hastening away, when Papillon called him back. "When you leave the Morgue you will want to go somewhere else," he said, "you told me that you had another appointment, and that you were already late."

"Yes, I ought to be at the Palais de Justice; but it is only a few steps from here."

"No matter. I will wait for you at the corner of the bridge. It's useless to say 'no'; I've made up my mind, and I'm a Breton, you know. I want you to ride out the thirty francs that those jades paid me."

It would have been cruel to refuse such a request. Accordingly, Lecoq made a gesture of assent, and then hurried towards the Morgue.

If there was a crowd on the roadway outside, it was because the gloomy building itself was crammed full of people. Indeed, the sightseers most of whom could see nothing at all, were packed as closely as sardines, and it was only by dint of well nigh superhuman efforts that Lecoq managed to effect an entrance. As usual, he found among the mob a large number of girls and women; for, strange to say, the Parisian fair sex is rather partial to the disgusting sights and horrible emotions that repay a visit to the Morgue.

The shop and work girls who reside in the neighbourhood readily go out of their way to catch a glimpse of the corpses which crime, accident, and suicide bring to this horrible place. A few, the more sensitive among them, may come no further than the door, but the others enter, and after a long stare return and recount their impressions to their less courageous companions.

If there should be no corpse exhibited; if all the marble slabs are unoccupied, strange as it may seem, the visitors turn hastily away with an expression of disappointment or discontent. There was no fear of their doing so, however, on the morrow of the tragedy at the Poivrière, for the mysterious murderer whose identity Lecoq was trying to establish, had fur-

nished three victims for their delectation. Panting with curiosity, they paid but little attention to the unhealthy atmosphere; and yet a damp chill came from beyond the iron railings, while from the crowd itself rose an infectious vapour, impregnated with the stench of the chloride of lime used as a disinfectant.

As a continuous accompaniment to the exclamations, sighs, and whispered comments of the by-standers, came the murmur of the water trickling from a spigot at the head of each slab; a tiny stream that flowed forth only to fall in fine spray upon the marble. Through the small arched windows a grey light stole in on the exposed bodies, bringing each muscle into bold relief, revealing the ghastly tints of the lifeless flesh, and imparting a sinister aspect to the tattered clothing hung around the room to aid in the identification of the corpses. This clothing, after a certain time, is sold—for nothing is wasted at the Morgue.

However, Lecoq was too occupied with his own thoughts to remark the horrors of the scene. He scarcely bestowed a glance on the three victims. He was looking for Father Absinthe whom he could not perceive. Had Gévrol intentionally or unintentionally failed to fulfil his promise, or had Father Absinthe forgotten his duty in his morning dram?

Unable to explain the cause of his comrade's absence, Lecoq addressed himself to the head keeper: "It would seem that no one has recognised the victims," he remarked.

"No one. And yet, ever since opening, we have had an immense crowd. If I were master here, on days like this, I would charge an admission fee of two sous a head, with half-price for children. It would bring in a round sum, more than enough to cover the expenses."

The keeper's reply seemed to offer an inducement to conversation, but Lecoq did not seize it. "Excuse me," he interrupted, "didn't a detective come here this morning?"

"Yes, there was one here."

"Has he gone away then? I don't see him anywhere."

The keeper glanced suspiciously at his eager questioner, but after a moment's hesitation, he ventured to inquire: "Are you one of them?"

"Yes, I am," replied Lecoq, exhibiting his card in support of his assertion.

"And your name?"

"Is Lecoq."

The keeper's face brightened up. "In that case," said he, "I have a letter for you, written by your comrade, who was obliged to go away. Here it is."

The young detective at once tore open the envelope and read: "Monsieur Lecoq—"

"Monsieur?" this simple formula of politeness brought a faint smile to his lips. Was it not, on Father Absinthe's part, an evident recognition of his colleague's superiority. Indeed, our hero accepted it as a token of unquestioning devotion which it would be his duty to repay with a master's kind protection towards his first disciple. However, he had no time to waste in thought, and accordingly at once proceeded to peruse the note which ran as follows:

"Monsieur Lecoq,—I had been standing on duty since the opening of the Morgue, when at about nine o'clock three young men entered, arm-in-arm. From their manner and appearance, I judged them to be clerks in some store

or warehouse. Suddenly I noticed that one of them turned as white as his shirt; and calling the attention of his companions to one of the unknown victims, he whispered, 'Gustave!'

"His comrades put their hands over his mouth, and one of them exclaimed, 'What are you about, you fool, to mix yourself up with this affair! Do you want to get us into trouble?'

"Thereupon they went out, and I followed them. But the person who had first spoken, was so overcome that he could scarcely drag himself along; and his companions were obliged to take him to a little restaurant close by. I entered it myself, and it is there I write this letter, in the meantime watching them out of the corner of my eye. I send this note, explaining my absence, to the head keeper who will give it you. You will understand that I am going to follow these men. "A. B. S."

The handwriting of this letter was almost illegible; and there were mistakes in spelling in wellnigh every line; still, its meaning was clear and exact, and could not fail to excite the most flattering hopes.

Lecoq's face was so radiant when he returned to the cab, that, as the old coachman urged on his horse, he could not refrain from saying, "Things are going on to suit you."

A friendly "hush!" was the only response. It required all Lecoq's attention to classify this new information. When he alighted from the cab in front of the Palais de Justice, he experienced considerable difficulty in dismissing the old cabman, who insisted upon remaining at his orders. He succeeded at last, however, but even when he had reached the portico on the left side of the building, the worthy fellow, standing up, still shouted at the top of his voice: "At M. Trigault's house—don't forget—Father Papillon—No. 998—1,000 less 2—."

Lecoq had entered the left wing of the Palais. He climbed the stairs till he had reached the third floor, and was about to enter the long, narrow, badly-lighted corridor known as the Galerie de l'Instruction, when finding a door-keeper installed behind a heavy oaken desk, he remarked: "M. d'Escorval is of course in his office?"

The man shook his head. "No," said he, "M. d'Escorval is not here this morning, and he won't be here for several weeks."

"Why not! What do you mean?"

"Last night, as he was alighting from his carriage, at his own door, he had a most unfortunate fall, and broke his leg."

IX.

SOME men are wealthy. They own a carriage drawn by a pair of high-stepping horses, and driven by a coachman in stylish livery; and as they pass by, leaning back on comfortable cushions, they become the object of many an envious glance. Sometimes, however, the coachman has taken a drop too much, and upsets the carriage; perhaps the horses run away and a general smash ensues; or, maybe, the hitherto fortunate owner, in a moment of absent-mindedness, misses the step, and fractures his leg on the curbstone. Such accidents occur every day; and their long list should make humble foot-passengers bless the lowly lot which preserves them from such peril.

On learning the misfortune that had befallen M. d'Escorval, Lecoq's face

were such an expression of consternation that the door-keeper could not help laughing. "What is there so very extraordinary about that I've told you?" he asked.

"I—oh! nothing—"

The detective did not speak the truth. The fact is, he had just been struck by the strange coincidence of two events—the supposed murderer's attempted suicide, and the magistrate's fall. Still, he did not allow the vague presentiment that flitted through his mind to assume any definite form. For after all, what possible connection could there be between the two occurrences? Then again, he never allowed himself to be governed by prejudice, nor had he as yet enriched his formulary with an axiom he afterwards professed: "Distrust all circumstances that seem to favour your secret wishes."

Of course, Lecoq did not rejoice at M. d'Escorval's accident; could he have prevented it, he would have gladly done so. Still, he could not help saying to himself that this stroke of misfortune would free him from all further connection with a man whose superciliousness and disdain had been painfully disagreeable to his feelings.

This thought caused a sensation of relief—almost one of light-heartedness. "In that case," said the young detective to the door-keeper, "I shall have nothing to do here this morning."

"You must be joking," was the reply. "Does the world stop moving because one man is disabled? The news only arrived an hour ago; but all the urgent business that M. d'Escorval had in charge, has already been divided among the other magistrates."

"I came here about that terrible affair that occurred the other night just beyond the Barrière de Fontainebleau."

"Eh! Why didn't you say so at once? A messenger has been sent to the préfecture after you already. M. Segmuller has charge of the case, and he's waiting for you."

Doubt and perplexity were plainly written on Lecoq's forehead. He was trying to remember the magistrate that bore this name, and wondered whether he was a likely man to espouse his views.

"Yes," resumed the door-keeper, who seemed to be in a talkative mood, "M. Segmuller—you don't seem to know him. He is a worthy man, not quite so grim as most of our gentlemen. A prisoner he had examined said one day: 'That devil there has pumped me so well that I shall certainly have my head chopped off; but, nevertheless, he's a good fellow!'"

His heart somewhat lightened by these favourable reports, Lecoq went and tapped at a door that was indicated to him, and which bore the number—22.

"Come in!" called out a pleasant voice.

The young detective entered, and found himself face to face with a man of some forty years of age, tall and rather corpulent, who at once exclaimed: "Ah! you are Lecoq. Very well—take a seat. I am busy just now looking over the papers of the case, but I will attend to you in five minutes."

Lecoq obeyed, at the same time glancing furtively at the magistrate with whom he was about to work. M. Segmuller's appearance corresponded perfectly with the description given by the door-keeper. His plump face wore an air of frankness and benevolence, and his blue eyes had a most pleasant expression. Nevertheless, Lecoq distrusted these appearances, and in so doing he was right.

Born near Strasbourg, M. Segmuller possessed that candid physiognomy common to most of the natives of blonde Alsace—a deceitful mask, which, behind seeming simplicity, not unfrequently conceals a Gascon cunning, rendered all the more dangerous since it is allied with extreme caution. He had a wonderfully alert, penetrating mind ; but his system—every magistrate has his own—was mainly good-humour. Unlike most of his colleagues, who were as stiff and cutting in manner as the sword which the statue of Justice usually holds in her hand, he made simplicity and kindness of demeanour his leading trait, though, of course, without ever losing sight of his magisterial duties.

Still, the tone of his voice was so paternal, and the subtle purport of his questions so veiled by his seeming frankness, that most of those whom he examined forgot the necessity of protecting themselves, and unawares confessed their guilt. Thus, it frequently happened, that while some unsuspecting culprit was complacently congratulating himself upon getting the best of the judge, the poor wretch was really being turned inside out like a glove.

By the side of such a man as M. Segmuller, a grave and slender clerk would have excited distrust ; so he had chosen one who was a caricature of himself. This clerk's name was Goguet. He was short but corpulent, and his broad beardless face habitually wore a silly smile, not out of keeping with his intellect, which was none of the brightest.

As stated above, when Lecoq entered M. Segmuller's room the latter was busy studying the case which had so unexpectedly fallen into his hands. All the articles which the young detective had collected, from the flakes of wool to the diamond earring, were spread out upon the magistrate's desk. With the greatest attention, he perused the report prepared by Lecoq, and according to the different phases of the affair, he examined one or another of the objects before him, or else consulted the plan of the ground.

A good half-hour elapsed before he had completed his inspection, when he threw himself back in his arm-chair. "Monsieur Lecoq," he said, slowly, "Monsieur d'Escorval has informed me by a note on the margin of this file of papers, that you are an intelligent man, and that we can trust you."

"I am willing, at all events."

"You speak too slightly of yourself ; this is the first time that an agent has brought me a report as complete as your's. You are young, and if you persevere, I think you will be able to accomplish great things in your profession."

Nervous with delight, Lecoq bowed and stammered his thanks.

"Your opinion in this matter coincides with mine," continued M. Segmuller, "and the public prosecutor informs me that M. d'Escorval shares the same views. An enigma is before us ; and it ought to be solved."

"Oh !—we'll solve it, I am certain, sir," exclaimed Lecoq, who at this moment felt capable of the most extraordinary achievements. Indeed, he would have gone through fire and water for the magistrate who had received him so kindly, and his enthusiasm sparkled so plainly in his eyes that M. Segmuller could not restrain a smile.

"I have strong hopes of it myself," he responded ; "but we are far from the end. Now, what have you been doing since yesterday ? Did M. d'Escorval give you any orders ? Have you obtained any fresh information ?"

"I don't think I have wasted my time," replied Lecoq, who at once proceeded to relate the various facts that had come to his knowledge since his departure from the Poivrière.

With rare precision and that happiness of expression which seldom fails a man well acquainted with his subject, he recounted the daring feats of the presumed accomplice, the points he had noted in the supposed murderer's conduct, and the latter's unsuccessful attempt at self-destruction. He repeated the testimony given by the cab-driver, and by the concierge in the Rue de Bourgogne, and then read the letter he had received from Father Absinthe.

In conclusion, he placed on the magistrate's desk some of the dirt he had scraped from the prisoner's feet; at the same time depositing beside it a similar parcel of dust collected on the floor of the cell in which the murderer was confined at the Barrière d'Italie.

When Lecoq had explained the reasons that had led him to collect this soil, and the conclusions that might be drawn from a comparison of the two parcels, M. Segmuller, who had been listening attentively, at once exclaimed: "You are right. It may be that you have discovered a means to confound all the prisoner's denials. At all events, this is certainly a proof of surprising sagacity on your part."

So it must have been, for Goguet, the clerk, nodded approvingly. "Capital!" he murmured. "I should never have thought of that."

While he was talking, M. Segmuller had carefully placed all the so-called "articles of conviction" in a large drawer, from which they would not emerge until the trial. "Now," said he, "I understand the case well enough to examine the Widow Chupin. We may gain some information from her."

He was laying his hand upon the bell, when Lecoq stopped him with an almost supplicating gesture. "I have one great favour to ask you sir," he observed.

"What is it?—speak."

"I should very much like to be present at this examination. It takes so little, sometimes, to awaken a happy inspiration."

Although the law says that the accused shall first of all be privately examined by the investigating magistrate assisted by his clerk, it also allows the presence of police-agents. Accordingly, M. Segmuller told Lecoq that he might remain. At the same time he rang his bell; which was speedily answered by a messenger.

"Has the Widow Chupin been brought here, in compliance with my orders?" asked M. Segmuller.

"Yes, sir; she is in the gallery outside."

"Let her come in then."

An instant later, the hostess of the Poivrière entered the room, bowing to the right and to the left. This was not her first appearance before a magistrate, and she was not ignorant of the respect that is due to justice. Accordingly, she had arrayed herself for her examination with the utmost care. She had arranged her rebellious grey locks in smooth bandeaux, and her garments, although of common material, looked positively neat. She had even persuaded one of the prison warders to buy her—with the money she had about her at the time of her arrest—a black crape cap, and a couple of white pocket-handkerchiefs, intending to deluge the latter with her tears, should the situation call for a pathetic display.

She was indeed far too knowing to rely solely on the mere artifices of dress; hence, she had also drawn upon her *répertoire* of grimaces for an innocent, sad, and yet resigned expression, well fitted, in her opinion, to win the sympathy and indulgence of the magistrate upon whom her fate would depend.

Thus disguised, with downcast eyes and honeyed voice, she looked so unlike the terrible termagant of the Poivrière, that her customers would scarcely have recognised her. Indeed, an honest old bachelor might have offered her twenty francs a month to take charge of his chambers—solely on the strength of her good looks. But M. Segmuller had unmasked so many hypocrites that he was not deceived for a moment: "What an old actress!" he muttered to himself, and glancing at Lecoq he perceived the same thought sparkling in the young detective's eyes. It is true that the magistrate's penetration, may have been due to some notes he had just perused—notes containing an abstract of the woman's former life, and furnished by the chief of police at the magistrate's request.

With a gesture of authority M. Segmuller warned Goguet, the clerk with the silly smile, to get his writing materials ready. He then turned towards the Widow Chupin. "Your name?" he asked in a sharp tone.

"Aspasie Clapardty, my maiden name," replied the old woman, "and to-day, the Widow Chupin, at your service, sir;" so saying, she made a low curtsy, and then added: "A lawful widow, you understand, sir; I have my marriage papers safe in my chest at home; and if you wish to send anyone——"

"Your age?" interrupted the magistrate.

"Fifty-four."

"Your profession?"

"Dealer in wines and spirits outside Paris, near the Rue du Château des-Rentiers, just beyond the fortifications."

A prisoner's examination always begins with these questions as to individuality, which give both the magistrate and the culprit time to study each other, to try, as it were, each other's strength, before joining in a serious struggle; just as two duellists, about to engage in mortal combat, first try a few passes with the foils.

"Now," resumed M. Segmuller, "we will note your antecedents. Have you not already been found guilty of several offences?"

The Widow Chupin was too well versed in criminal procedure to be ignorant of those famous records, which render the denial of identity such a difficult matter in France. "I have been unfortunate, my good judge," she whined.

"Yes, several times. First of all you were arrested on a charge of receiving stolen goods."

"But it was proved that I was innocent, that my character was whiter than snow. My poor, dear husband had been deceived by his comrades; that was all."

"Possibly. But while your husband was undergoing his sentence, you were condemned, first to one month's, and then to three month's imprisonment for stealing."

"Oh, I had some enemies who did their best to ruin me."

"Next you were imprisoned for having led some young girls astray."

"They were good-for-nothing hussies, my kind sir, heartless, unprincipled creatures. I did them many favours, and then they went and related a batch of falsehoods to ruin me. I have always been too kind and considerate towards others."

The list of the woman's offences was not exhausted, but M. Segmuller thought it useless to continue. "Such is your past," he resumed. "At the present time your wine-shop is the resort of rogues and criminals. Your son is undergoing his fourth term of imprisonment: and it has been

clearly proved that you abetted and assisted him in his evil deeds. Your daughter-in-law, by some miracle, has remained honest and industrious, hence, you have tormented and abused her to such an extent that the authorities have been obliged to interfere. When she left your house you tried to keep her child—no doubt meaning to bring it up after the same fashion as its father."

"This," thought the Widow Chupin, "is the right moment to try and soften the magistrate's heart." Accordingly, she drew one of her new handkerchiefs from her pocket, and, by dint of rubbing her eyes, endeavoured to extract a tear. "Oh, unhappy me!" she groaned. "How can anyone imagine that I would harm my grandson, my poor little Toto! Why I should be worse than a wild beast, to try and bring my own flesh and blood to perdition."

She soon perceived, however, that her lamentations did not have much effect on M. Segmuller, hence, suddenly changing both her tone and manner she began her justification. She did not positively deny her past; but she threw all the blame on the injustice of destiny, which, while favouring a few, generally the less deserving, showed no mercy to others. Alas! she was one of those who had had no luck in life, having always been persecuted, despite her innocence. In this last affair, for instance, how was she to blame? A triple murder had stained her shop with blood; but the most respectable establishments are not exempt from similar catastrophes. During her solitary confinement, she had, said she, dived down into the deepest recesses of her conscience, and she was still unable to discover what blame could justly be laid at her door.

"I can tell you," interrupted the magistrate, "You are accused of impeding the action of the law."

"Good heavens! Is it possible!"

"And of seeking to defeat justice. This is equivalent to complicity, Widow Chupin; take care. When the police entered your cabin, after this crime had been committed, you refused to answer their questions."

"I told them all that I knew."

"Very well, then you must repeat what you told them to me."

M. Segmuller had reason to feel satisfied. He had conducted the examination in such a way that the Widow Chupin would now have to initiate a narrative of the tragedy. This was an excellent point gained; for this shrewd old woman, possessed of all her coolness, would naturally have been on her guard against any direct questions. Now, it was essential that she should not suspect either what the magistrate knew of the affair, or what he was ignorant of. By leaving her to her own devices she might, in the course of the version which she proposed to substitute for the truth, not merely strengthen Lecoq's theories, but also let fall some remark calculated to facilitate the task of future investigation. Both M. Segmuller and Lecoq were of opinion that the version of the crime, which they were about to hear, had been concocted at the station-house of the Place d'Italie, while the murderer and the spurious drunkard were left together, and that it had been transmitted by the accomplice to the widow during the brief conversation they were allowed to have through the wicket of the latter's cell.

Invited by the magistrate to recount the circumstances of the tragedy, Mother Chupin did not hesitate for a moment. "Oh, it was a very simple affair, my good sir," she began. "I was sitting by my fireside on Sunday evening, when suddenly the door opened, and three men and two women came in"

M. Segmuller and the young detective exchanged glances. The accomplice had evidently seen Lecoq and his comrade examining the foot-prints, and accordingly the presence of the two women was not to be denied.

"What time was this?" asked the magistrate.

'About eleven o'clock."

"Go on."

"As soon as they sat down, they ordered a bowl of wine, *à la Française*. Without boasting, I may say that I haven't an equal in preparing that drink. Of course, I waited on them, and afterwards, having a blouse to mend for my boy, I went upstairs to my room, which is just over the shop."

"Leaving these people alone?"

"Yes, my judge."

"That showed a great deal of confidence on your part."

The widow sadly shook her head. "People as poor as I am don't fear thieves," she sighed.

"Go on—go on."

"Well, I had been upstairs about half an hour, when I heard someone below call out: 'Eh! old woman!' So I went down, and found a tall big-bearded man, who had just come in. He asked for a glass of brandy, which I brought to a table where he had sat down by himself."

"And then, did you go upstairs again?" interrupted the magistrate.

The exclamation was ironical, of course, but no one could have told from the Widow Chupin's placid countenance whether she was aware that such was the case.

"Precisely, my good sir," she replied in the most composed manner. "Only this time I had scarcely taken up my needle when I heard a terrible uproar in the shop. I hurried downstairs to put a stop to it—but heaven knows my interference would have been of little use. The three men who had come in first of all had fallen upon the new comer, and they were beating him, my good sir, they were killing him. I screamed. Just then the man who had come in alone drew a revolver from his pocket; he fired and killed one of his assailants, who fell to the ground. I was so frightened that I crouched on the staircase and threw my apron over my head that I might not see the blood run. An instant later Monsieur Gévrol arrived with his men; they forced open the door, and behold—"

The Widow Chupin here stopped short. These wretched old women, who have trafficked in every sort of vice, and who have tasted every disgrace, at times attain a perfection of hypocrisy calculated to deceive the most subtle penetration. Anyone unacquainted with the antecedents of the landlady of the Poivrière, would certainly have been impressed by her apparent candour, so skilfully did she affect a display of frankness, surprise, and fear. Her expression would have been simply perfect, had it not been for her eyes, her small grey eyes, as restless as those of a caged animal, and gleaming at intervals with craftiness and cunning.

There she stood, mentally rejoicing at the success of her narrative, for she was convinced that the magistrate placed implicit confidence in her revelations. Although during her recital, delivered, by the way, with conjuror-like volubility, not a muscle of M. Segmuller's face had betrayed what was passing in his mind. When she paused, out of breath, he rose from his seat and without a word approached his clerk to inspect the notes taken during the earlier part of the examination.

From the corner where he was quietly seated, Lecoq did not cease watch-

ing the prisoner. "She thinks that it's all over," he muttered to himself, "she fancies that her deposition is accepted without question."

If such were, indeed, the widow's opinion, she was soon to be undeceived; for, after addressing a few low-spoken words to the smiling Goguët, M. Segmuller took a seat near the fireplace, convinced that the moment had now come to abandon defensive tactics, and open fire on the enemy's positions.

"So, Widow Chupin," he began, "you tell us that you didn't remain for a single moment with the people who came into your shop that evening!"

"Not a moment."

"They came in and ordered what they wanted; you waited on them, and then left them to themselves?"

"Yes, my good sir."

"It seems to me impossible that you didn't overhear some words of their conversation. What were they talking about?"

"I am not in the habit of playing the spy over my customers."

"Didn't you hear anything?"

"Nothing at all."

The magistrate shrugged his shoulders with an air of commiseration. "In other words," he remarked, "you refuse to inform justice——"

"Oh, my good sir!"

"Allow me to finish. All these improbable stories about leaving the shop and mending your son's clothes in your bedroom, are so many inventions. You have concocted them so as to be able to say to me: 'I didn't see anything; I didn't hear anything; I don't know anything.' If such is your system of defence, I warn you that it will be impossible for you to maintain it, and I may add that it would not be admitted by any tribunal."

"It is not a system of defence; it is the truth."

M. Segmuller seemed to reflect for a moment; then, suddenly, he exclaimed: "Then you have nothing to tell me about this miserable assassin?"

"But he is not an assassin, my good sir."

"What do you mean by such an assertion?"

"I mean that he only killed the others in protecting himself. They picked a quarrel with him; he was alone against three, and saw very plainly that he could expect no mercy from brigands who——"

The colour rose to the Widow Chupin's cheeks, and she suddenly checked herself, greatly embarrassed, and evidently regretting that she had not bridled her tongue. It is true she might reasonably hope, that the magistrate had imperfectly heard her words, and had failed to seize their full purport, for two or three red hot coals having fallen from the grate on to the hearth, he had taken up the tongs, and seemed to be engrossed in the talk of artistically arranging the fire.

"Who can tell me—who can prove to me that, on the contrary, it was not this man who first attacked the others?" he murmured, thoughtfully.

"I can," stoutly, declared the widow already forgetful of her prudent hesitation, "I can swear it."

M. Segmuller looked up, intense astonishment written upon his face. "How can you know that?" he said slowly. "How can you swear it? You were in your bedroom when the quarrel began."

Silent and motionless in his corner, Lecoq was inwardly jubilant. This was a most happy result, he thought, but a few questions more, and the old woman would be obliged to contradict herself. What she had already said

sufficed to show that she must have a secret interest in the matter, or else she would never have been so imprudently earnest in defending the prisoner.

"However, you have probably been led to this conclusion by your knowledge of the murderer's character," remarked M. Segmuller, "you are apparently well acquainted with him."

"Oh, I had never set eyes on him before that evening."

"But he must have been in your establishment before?"

"Never in his life."

"Oh, oh! Then how do you explain that on entering the shop while you were up-stairs, this unknown person—this stranger—should have called out: 'Here, old woman!' Did he merely *guess* that the establishment was kept by a woman; and that this woman was no longer young?"

"He did not say that."

"Reflect a moment; you, yourself just told me so."

"Oh, I didn't say that, I'm sure, my good sir."

"Yes you did, and I will prove it by having your evidence read: Goguet, read the passage, if you please."

The smiling clerk looked back through his minutes and then, in his clearest voice, he read these words, taken down as they fell from the Widow Chupin's lips: "I had been up-stairs about half-an-hour, when I heard someone below call out 'Eh! old woman.' So I went down," &c., &c.

"Are you convinced?" asked M. Segmuller.

The old offender's assurance was sensibly diminished by this proof of her prevarication. However, instead of discussing the subject any further, the magistrate glided over it as if he did not attach much importance to the incident.

"And the other men," he resumed, "those who were killed: did you know them?"

"No, good sir, no more than I knew Adam and Eve."

"And were you not surprised to see three men utterly unknown to you, and accompanied by two women, enter your establishment?"

"Sometimes chance—"

"Come! you do not think of what you are saying. It was not chance that brought these customers, in the middle of the night, to a wine-shop with a reputation like yours—an establishment situated far from any frequented route, in the midst of a desolate waste."

"I'm not a sorceress; I say what I think."

"Then you did not even know the youngest of the victims, the man who was attired as a soldier, he who was named Gustave?"

"Not at all."

M. Segmuller noted the intonation of this response, and then slowly added: "But you must have heard of one of Gustave's friends, a man called Lacheneur?"

On hearing this name, the landlady of the Poivrière became visibly embarrassed, and it was in an altered voice that she stammered: "Lacheneur! Lacheneur! no, I have never heard that name mentioned."

Still, despite her denial, the effect of M. Segmuller's remark was evident, and Lecoq secretly vowed that he would find this Lacheneur, at any cost. Did not the "articles of conviction" comprise a letter sent by this man to Gustave and written, so Lecoq had reason to believe, in a café on the Boulevard Beaumarchais? With such a clue and a little patience, the mysterious Lacheneur might yet be discovered.

"Now," continued M. Segmuller, "let us speak of the women who accompanied these unfortunate men. What sort of women were they?"

"Oh! women of no account whatever!"

"Were they well dressed?"

"On the contrary, very miserably."

"Well, give me a description of them."

"They were tall and powerfully built, and indeed, as it was Shrove Sunday, I first of all took them for men in disguise. They had hands like shoulders of mutton, gruff voices, and very black hair. They were as dark as mulattos—"

"Enough!" interrupted the magistrate, "I require no further proof of your mendacity. These women were short, and one of them was remarkably fair."

"I swear to you, my good sir——"

"Do not declare it upon oath. I shall be forced to confront you with an honest man, who will tell you to your face that you are a liar!"

The widow did not reply, and there was a moment's silence. M. Segmuller determined to deal a decisive blow. "Do you also affirm that you had nothing of a compromising character in the pocket of your apron?" he asked.

"Nothing—you may have it examined; it was left in the house."

"Then you still persist in your system," resumed M. Segmuller. "Believe me, you are wrong. Reflect—it rests with you to go to the Assize Court as a witness, or an accomplice."

Although the widow seemed crushed by this unexpected blow, the magistrate did not add another word. Her deposition was read over to her, she signed it, and was then led away.

M. Segmuller immediately seated himself at his desk, filled up a blank form and handed it to his clerk, saying: "This is an order for the governor of the Dépôt. Tell him to send the supposed murderer here at once."

X.

If it is difficult to extort a confession from a man interested in preserving silence and persuaded that no proofs can be produced against him, it is a yet more arduous task to make a woman, similarly situated, speak the truth. As they say at the Palais de Justice, one might as well try to make the devil confess.

The examination of the Widow Chupin had been conducted with the greatest possible care by M. Segmuller, who was as skilful in managing his questions as a tried general in manœuvring his troops.

However, all that he had discovered was that the landlady of the Poivrière was conniving with the murderer. The motive of her connivance was yet unknown, and the murderer's identity still a mystery. Both M. Segmuller and Lecoq were nevertheless of opinion that the old hag knew everything. "It is almost certain," remarked the magistrate, "that she was acquainted with the people who came to her house—with the women, the victims, the murderer—with all of them, in fact. I am positive as regards that fellow Gustave—I read it in her eyes. I am also convinced that she knows Lacheneur—the man upon whom the dying soldier breathed vengeance—the mysterious personage who evidently possesses the key to the enigma. That man must be found."

"Ah!" replied Lecoq, "and I will find him even if I have to question every one of the eleven hundred thousand men who constantly walk the streets of Paris!"

This was promising so much that the magistrate, despite his pre-occupations, could not repress a smile.

"If this old woman would only decide to make a clean breast of it at her next examination!" remarked Lecoq.

"Yes. But she won't."

The young detective shook his head despondingly. Such was his own opinion. He did not delude himself with false hopes, and he had noticed between the Widow Chupin's eyebrows, those furrows which, according to physiognomists, indicate a senseless, brutish obstinacy.

"Women never confess," resumed the magistrate; "and even when they seemingly resign themselves to such a course, they are not sincere. They fancy they have discovered some means of misleading their examiner. On the contrary, evidence will crush the most obstinate man; he gives up the struggle, and confesses. Now, a woman scoffs at evidence. Show her the sun; tell her it's daytime: at once she will close her eyes and say to you, 'No, it's night.' Male prisoners plan and combine different systems of defence according to their social positions; the women, on the contrary, have but one system, no matter what may be their condition in life. They deny everything, persist in their denials even when the proof against them is overwhelming, and then they cry. When I worry the Chupin with disagreeable questions, at her next examination, you may be sure she will turn her eyes into a fountain of tears."

In his impatience, M. Segmuller angrily stamped his foot. He had many weapons in his arsenal; but none strong enough to break a woman's dogged resistance.

"If I only understood the motive that guides this old hag!" he continued. "But not a clue! Who can tell me what powerful interest induces her to remain silent? Is it her own cause that she is defending? Is she an accomplice? Is it certain that she did not aid the murderer in planning an ambuscade?"

"Yes," responded Lecoq, slowly, "yes; this supposition very naturally presents itself to the mind. But think a moment, sir, such a theory would prove that the idea we entertained, a short time since, is altogether false. If the Widow Chupin is an accomplice, the murderer is not the person we have supposed him to be; he is simply the man he seems to be."

This argument apparently convinced M. Segmuller. "What is your opinion?" he asked.

The young detective had formed his opinion a long while ago. But how could he, a humble police-agent, venture to express any decided views when the magistrate hesitated? He understood well enough that his position necessitated extreme reserve; hence, it was in the most modest tone that he replied: "Might not the pretended drunkard have dazzled Mother Chupin's eyes with the prospect of a brilliant reward? Might he not have promised her a considerable sum of money?"

He paused; Goguet the smiling clerk had just returned. Behind him stood a private of the Garde de Paris who remained respectfully on the threshold, his heels in a straight line, his right hand raised to the peak of his shako, and his elbow on a level with his eyes, in accordance with the regulations.

"The governor of the Dépôt," said the soldier, "sends me to inquire if

he is to keep the Widow Chupin in solitary confinement; she complains bitterly about it."

M. Segmuller reflected for a moment. "Certainly," he murmured, as if replying to an objection made by his own conscience; "certainly, it is an undoubted aggravation of suffering; but if I allow this woman to associate with the other prisoners, she will certainly find some opportunity to communicate with parties outside. This must not be; the interests of justice and truth must be considered first." The thought embodied in these last words decided him. "Despite her complaints the prisoner must be kept in solitary confinement until further orders," he said.

The soldier allowed his right hand to fall to his side, he carried his right foot three inches behind his left heel, and wheeled round. Goguët, the smiling clerk then closed the door, and drawing a large envelope from his pocket, handed it to the magistrate. "Here is a communication from the governor of the Dépôt," said he.

The magistrate broke the seal, and read aloud, as follows: "I feel compelled to advise M. Segmuller to take every precaution with the view of assuring his own safety before proceeding with the examination of the prisoner, May. Since his unsuccessful attempt at suicide, this prisoner has been in such a state of excitement that we have been obliged to keep him in a strait-waistcoat. He did not close his eyes all last night, and the guards who watched him expected every moment that he would become delirious. However, he did not utter a word. When food was offered him this morning, he resolutely rejected it, and I should not be surprised if it were his intention to starve himself to death. I have rarely seen a more determined criminal. I think him capable of any desperate act."

"Ah!" exclaimed the clerk, whose smile had disappeared, "If I were in your place, sir, I would only let him in here with an escort of soldiers."

"What! you—Goguët, you, an old clerk—make such a proposition! Can it be that you're frightened?"

"Frightened! No, certainly not; but—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Lecoq, in a tone that betrayed superlative confidence in his own muscles; "Am I not here?"

If M. Segmuller had seated himself at his desk, that article of furniture would naturally have served as a rampart between the prisoner and himself. For purposes of convenience he usually did place himself behind it; but after Goguët's display of fear, he would have blushed to have taken the slightest measure of self-protection. Accordingly, he went and sat down by the fireplace—as he had done a few moments previously while questioning the Widow Chupin—and then ordered his door-keeper to admit the prisoner alone. He emphasized this word "alone."

A moment later the door was flung open with a violent jerk, and the prisoner entered, or rather precipitated himself, into the room. Goguët turned pale behind his table, and Lecoq advanced a step forward, ready to spring upon the prisoner and pinion him should it be requisite. But when the latter reached the centre of the room, he paused and looked around him. "Where is the magistrate?" he inquired, in a hoarse voice.

"I am the magistrate," replied M. Segmuller.

"No, the other one."

"What other one?"

"The one who came to question me last evening."

"He has met with an accident. Yesterday, after leaving you, he fell down and broke his leg."

"Oh!"

"And I am to take his place."

The prisoner was apparently deaf to the explanation. Excitement had seemingly given way to stupor. His features, hitherto contracted with anger, now relaxed. He grew pale and tottered, as if about to fall.

"Compose yourself," said the magistrate in a benevolent tone; "if you are too weak to remain standing, take a seat."

Already, with a powerful effort, the man had recovered his self-possession. A momentary gleam flashed from his eyes. "Many thanks for your kindness," he replied, "but this is nothing. I felt a slight sensation of dizziness, but it is over now."

"Is it long since you have eaten anything?"

"I have eaten nothing since that man"—and so saying he pointed to Lecoq—"brought me some bread and wine at the station-house."

"Wouldn't you like to take something?"

"No—and yet—if you would be so kind—I should like a glass of water."

"Will you not have some wine with it?"

"I should prefer pure water."

His request was at once complied with. He drained a first glassful at a single draught; the glass was then replenished and he drank again, this time, however, more slowly. One might have supposed that he was drinking in life itself. Certainly, when he laid down the empty glass, he seemed quite another man.

Eighteen out of every twenty criminals who appear before our investigating magistrates come prepared with a more or less complete plan of defence, which they have conceived during their preliminary confinement. Innocent or guilty, they have resolved on playing some part or other, which they begin to act as soon as they cross the threshold of the room where the magistrate awaits them.

The moment they enter his presence, the magistrate needs to bring all his powers of penetration into play; for such a culprit's first attitude as surely betrays his plan of defence as an index reveals a book's contents. In this case, however, M. Segmuller did not think that appearances were deceitful. It seemed evident to him that the prisoner was not feigning, but that the excited frenzy which marked his entrance was as real as his after stupor.

At all events, there seemed no fear of the danger the governor of the Dépôt had spoken of, and accordingly M. Segmuller seated himself at his desk. Here he felt stronger and more at ease for his back being turned to the window, his face was half hidden in shadow; and in case of need, he could, by bending over his papers, conceal any sign of surprise or discomfiture.

The prisoner, on the contrary, stood in the full light, and not a movement of his features, not the fluttering of an eye-lid could escape the magistrate's attention. He seemed to have completely recovered from his indisposition; and his features assumed an expression which indicated either careless indifference, or complete resignation.

"Do you feel better?" asked M. Segmuller.

"I feel very well."

"I hope," continued the magistrate, paternally, "that in future you will know how to moderate your excitement. Yesterday you tried to destroy yourself. It would have been another great crime added to many others—a crime which—"

With a hasty movement of the hand, the prisoner interrupted him. "I have committed no crime," said he, in a rough, but no longer threatening voice. "I was attacked, and I defended myself. Anyone has a right to do that. There were three men against me. It was a great misfortune; and I would give my right hand to repair it; but my conscience does not reproach me—that much!"

The prisoners "that much," was a contemptuous snap of his finger and thumb.

"And yet I've been arrested and treated like an assassin," he continued. "When I saw myself interred in that living tomb which you call a secret cell, I grew afraid; I lost my senses. I said to myself! 'My boy, they've buried you alive; and it is better to die—to die quickly, if you don't wish to suffer.' So I tried to strangle myself. My death wouldn't have caused the slightest sorrow to anyone. I have neither wife nor child depending upon me for support. However, my attempt was frustrated. I was bled; and then placed in a strait-waistcoat, as if I were a madman. Mad! I really believed I should become so. All night long the jailers sat around me, like children amusing themselves by tormenting a chained animal. They watched me, talked about me, and passed the candle to and fro before my eyes."

The prisoner talked forcibly, but without any attempt at oratorical display; there was bitterness but not anger in his tone; in short, he spoke with all the seeming sincerity of a man giving expression to some deep emotion or conviction. As the magistrate and the detective heard him speak, they were each seized with the same idea. "This man," they thought, "is very clever; it won't be easy to get the better of him."

Then, after a moment's reflection, M. Segmuller added aloud:—"This explains your first act of despair; but later on, for instance, even this morning, you refused to eat the food that was offered you."

As the prisoner heard this remark, his lowering face suddenly brightened, he gave a comical wink, and finally burst into a hearty laugh, gay, frank, and sonorous.

"That," said he, "is quite another matter. Certainly, I refused all they offered me, and now I will tell you why. As I had my hands confined in the strait-waistcoat, the jailer tried to feed me just as a nurse tries to feed a baby with pap. Now I wasn't going to submit to that, so I closed my lips as tightly as I could. Then he tried to force my mouth open and push the spoon in, just as one might force a sick dog's jaws apart and pour some medicine down its throat. The deuce take his impertinence! I tried to bite him: that's the truth, and if I had succeeded in getting his finger between my teeth, it would have stayed there. However, because I wouldn't be fed like a baby, all the prison officials raise their hands to heaven in holy horror, and point at me saying: 'What a terrible man! What an awful rascal!'"

The prisoner seemed to thoroughly enjoy the recollection of the scene he had described, for he now burst into another hearty laugh, to the great amazement of Lecoq, and the scandal of Goguett, the smiling clerk.

M. Segmuller also found it difficult to conceal his surprise. "You are too reasonable, I hope," he said, at last, "to attach any blame to these men, who, in confining you in a strait-waistcoat, were merely obeying the orders of their superior officers with the view of protecting you from your own violent passions."

"Hum!" responded the prisoner, suddenly growing serious. "I do

blame them, however, and if I had one of them in a corner——But, never mind, I shall get over it. If I know myself aright, I have no more spite in my composition than a chicken."

"Your treatment depends on your own conduct," rejoined M. Segmuller, "If you will only remain calm, you shan't be put in a strait-waistcoat again. But you must promise me that you will be quiet and conduct yourself properly."

The murderer sadly shook his head. "I shall be very prudent hereafter," said he, "but it is terribly hard to stay in prison with nothing to do. If I had some comrades with me, we could laugh and chat, and the time would slip by; but it is positively horrible to have to remain alone, entirely alone, in that cold, damp cell, where not a sound can be heard."

The magistrate bent over his desk to make a note. The word "comrades" had attracted his attention, and he proposed to ask the prisoner to explain it at a later stage of the inquiry.

"If you are innocent," he remarked, "you will soon be released; but it is necessary to prove your innocence."

"What must I do to prove it?"

"Tell the truth, the whole truth: answer my questions honestly without reserve."

"As for that, you may depend upon me." As he spoke the prisoner lifted his hand, as if to call upon God and man to witness his sincerity.

But M. Segmuller immediately intervened: "Prisoners do not take the oath," said he.

"Indeed!" ejaculated the man, with an astonished air, "that's strange!"

Although the magistrate had apparently paid but little attention to the prisoner, he had in point of fact carefully noted his attitude, his tone of voice, his looks and gestures. M. Segmuller had moreover done his utmost to set the culprit's mind at ease, to quiet all possible suspicion of a trap, and his inspection of the prisoner's person led him to believe that this result had been attained.

"Now," said he, "you will give me your attention; and do not forget that your liberty depends upon your frankness. What is your name?"

"May."

"What is your christian name?"

"I have none."

"That is impossible."

"I've been told that already three times since yesterday," rejoined the prisoner impatiently. "And yet it's the truth. If I were a liar, I could easily tell you that my name was, Peter, James, or John. But lying is not in my line. Really, I have no christian name. If it were a question of surnames, it would be quite another thing. I have had plenty of them."

"What were they?"

"Let me see—to commence with, when I was with Father Fougasse, I was called Affiloir, because you see——"

"Who was this Father Fougasse?"

"The great wild beast tamer, sir. Ah! he could boast of a menagerie and no mistake! Lions, tigers, and bears, serpents as big round as your thigh, paroquets of every colour under the sun. Ah! it was a wonderful collection. But unfortunately——"

Was the man jesting, or was he in earnest? It was so hard to decide, that M. Segmuller and Lecoq were equally in doubt. As for Goguet, the smiling clerk, he chuckled to himself as his pen ran over the paper.

"Enough," interrupted the magistrate, "How old are you?"

"Forty-four or forty-five years of age."

"Where were you born?"

"In Brittany, probably."

M. Segmuller thought he could detect a hidden vein of irony in this reply.

"I warn you," said he, severely, "that if you go on in this way your chances of recovering your liberty will be greatly compromised. Each of your answers is a breach of propriety."

As the supposed murderer heard these words, an expression of mingled distress and anxiety was apparent in his face. "Ah! I meant no offence, sir," he sighed. "You questioned me, and I replied. You will see that I have spoken the truth, if you will allow me to recount the history of the whole affair."

"When the prisoner speaks, the prosecution is enlightened," so runs an old proverb frequently quoted at the Palais de Justice. It does, indeed, seem almost impossible for a culprit, to say more than a few words in an investigating magistrate's presence, without betraying his intentions or his thoughts; without, in short, revealing more or less of the secret he is endeavouring to conceal. All criminals, even the most simple-minded, understand this, and those who are shrewd prove remarkably reticent. Confining themselves to the few facts upon which they have founded their defence, they are careful not to travel any further unless absolutely compelled to do so, and even then they only speak with the utmost caution. When questioned, they reply, of course, but always briefly; and they are very sparing of details.

In the present instance, however, the prisoner was prodigal of words. He did not seem to think that there was any danger of his being the medium of accomplishing his own decapitation. He did not hesitate like those who are afraid of misplacing a word of the romance they are substituting for the truth. Under other circumstances, this fact would have been a strong argument in his favour.

"You may tell your own story, then," said M. Segmuller in answer to the prisoner's indirect request.

The presumed murderer did not try to hide the satisfaction he experienced at thus being allowed to plead his own cause, in his own way. His eyes sparkled and his nostrils dilated as if with pleasure. He sat himself down, threw his head back, passed his tongue over his lips as if to moisten them, and said: "Am I to understand that you wish to hear my history?"

"Yes."

"Then you must know that one day about forty-five years ago, Father Tringlot, the manager of a travelling acrobatic company, was going from Guingamp to Saint Brieuc, in Brittany. He had with him two large vehicles containing his wife, the necessary theatrical paraphernalia, and the members of the company. Well, soon after passing Chatelaudren, he perceived something white lying by the roadside, near the edge of a ditch. 'I must go and see what that is,' he said to his wife. He stopped the horses, alighted from the vehicle he was in, went to the ditch, picked up the object he had noticed, and uttered a cry of surprise. You will ask me what he had found? Ah! good heavens! A mere trifle. He had found your humble servant, then about six months old."

With these last words, the prisoner made a low bow to his audience.

"Naturally, Father Tringlot carried me to his wife. She was a kind-

hearted woman. She took me, examined me, fed me, and said: 'He's a strong, healthy child; and we'll keep him since his mother has been so wicked as to abandon him by the roadside. I will teach him; and in five or six years he will be a credit to us.' They then asked each other what name they should give me, and as it happened to be the first of May, they decided to call me after the month, and so it happens that May has been my name from that day to this."

The prisoner paused again and looked from one to another of his listeners, as if seeking some sign of approval. None being forthcoming, he proceeded with his story.

"Father Tringlot was an uneducated man, entirely ignorant of the law. He did not inform the authorities that he had found a child, and, for this reason, although I was living, I did not legally exist, for, to have a legal existence it is necessary that one's name, parentage, and birthplace, should figure upon a municipal register.

"When I grew older, I rather congratulated myself on Father Tringlot's neglect. 'May, my boy,' said I, 'you are not put down on any government register, consequently there's no fear of your ever being drawn as a soldier.' I had a horror of military service, and a positive dread of bullets and cannon balls. Later on, when I had passed the proper age for the conscription, a lawyer told me that I should get into all kinds of trouble if I sought a place on the civil register so late in the day; and so I decided to exist surreptitiously. And this is why I have no christian name, and why I can't exactly say where I was born."

If truth has any particular accent of its own, as moralists have asserted, the murderer had found that accent. Voice, gesture, glance, expression, all were in accord; not a word of his long story had rung false.

"Now," said M. Segmuller, coldly, "what are your means of subsistence?"

By the prisoner's discomfited mien one might have supposed that he had expected to see the prison doors fly open at the conclusion of his narrative. "I have a profession," he replied plaintively. "The one that Mother Tringlot taught me. I subsist by its practice; and I have lived by it in France and other countries."

The magistrate thought he had found a flaw in the prisoner's armour. "You say you have lived in foreign countries?" he inquired.

"Yes; during the seventeen years that I was with M. Simpson's company, I travelled most of the time in England and Germany."

"Then you are a gymnast and an athlete. How is it that your hands are so white and soft?"

Far from being embarrassed, the prisoner raised his hands from his lap and examined them with evident complacency. "It is true they are pretty," said he, "but that is because I take good care of them and scarcely use them."

"Do they pay you, then, for doing nothing?"

"Ah, no, indeed! But, sir, my duty consists in speaking to the public, in turning a compliment, in making things pass off pleasantly, as the saying is; and, without boasting, I flatter myself that I have a certain knack—"

M. Segmuller stroked his chin, according to his habit whenever he considered that a prisoner had committed some grave blunder. "In that case," said he, "will you give me a specimen of your talent?"

"Ah, ha!" laughed the prisoner, evidently supposing this to be a jest on the part of the magistrate. "Ah, ha!"

"Obey me, if you please," insisted M. Segmuller.

The supposed murderer made no objection. His face at once assumed a different expression, his features wearing a mingled air of impudence, conceit, and irony. He caught up a ruler that was lying on the magistrate's desk, and flourishing it wildly, began as follows, in a shrill falsetto voice: "Silence, music! And you, big drum, hold your peace! Now is the hour, now is the moment, ladies and gentlemen, to witness the grand, unique performance of these great artists, unequaled in the world for their feats upon the trapeze and the tight-rope, and in innumerable other exercises of grace, suppleness and strength!"

"That is sufficient," interrupted the magistrate. "You can speak like that in France; but what do you say in Germany?"

"Of course, I use the language of that country."

"Let us hear, then!" retorted M. Segmuller, whose mother tongue was German.

The prisoner ceased his mocking manner, assumed an air of comical importance, and, without the slightest hesitation began to speak as follows, in very emphatic tones: "Mit Bewilligung der hochloeblichen Obrigkeit, wird heute, vor hiesiger ehrenwerthen Burgerschaft, zum erstenmal aufgefuehrt—Genovesa, oder—"

This opening of the prisoner's German harangue may be thus rendered: "With the permission of the local authorities there will now be presented before the honourable citizens, for the first time—Genevieve, or the—"

"Enough," said the magistrate, harshly. He rose, perhaps to conceal his chagrin, and added: "We will send for an interpreter to tell us whether you speak English as fluently."

On hearing these words, Lecoq modestly stepped forward. "I understand English," said he.

"Very well. You hear, prisoner?"

But the man was already transformed. British gravity and apathy were written upon his features; his gestures were stiff and constrained, and in the most ponderous tones he exclaimed: "Walk up! ladies and gentlemen, walk up! Long life to the queen and to the honourable mayor of this town! No country, England excepted—our glorious England!—could produce such a marvel, such a paragon—" For a minute or two longer he continued in the same strain.

M. Segmuller was leaning upon his desk, his face hidden by his hands. Lecoq, standing in front of the prisoner, could not conceal his astonishment. Goguet, the smiling clerk, alone found the scene amusing.

XI.

THE governor of the Dépôt, a functionary who had gained the reputation of an oracle by twenty years' experience in prisons and with prisoners—a man whom it was most difficult to deceive—had advised the magistrate to surround himself with every precaution before examining the prisoner, May.

And yet this man, characterised as a most dangerous criminal, and the very announcement of whose coming had made the clerk turn pale, had proved to be a practical, harmless, and jovial philosopher, vain of his eloquence, a bohemian whose existence depended upon his ability to turn a compliment; in short, a somewhat erratic genius.

This was certainly strange, but the seeming contradiction did not cause M. Segmuller to abandon the theory propounded by Lecoq. On the contrary, he was more than ever convinced of its truth. If he remained silent, with his elbows leaning on the desk, and his hands clasped over his eyes, it was only that he might gain time for reflection.

The prisoner's attitude and manner were remarkable. When his English harangue was finished, he remained standing in the centre of the room, a half-pleased, half-anxious expression on his face. Still, he was as much at ease as if he had been on the platform outside some stroller's booth, where, if one could believe his story, he had passed the greater part of his life. It was in vain that the magistrate sought for some indication of weakness on his features, which in their mobility were more enigmatical than the lineaments of the sphinx.

Thus far, M. Segmuller had been worsted in the encounter. It is true, however, that he had not as yet ventured on any direct attack, nor had he made use of any of the weapons which Lecoq had forged for his use. Still he was none the less annoyed at his defeat, as it was easy to see by the sharp manner in which he raised his head after a few moments' silence. "I see that you speak three European languages correctly," said he. "It is a rare talent."

The prisoner bowed, and smiled complacently. "Still that does not establish your identity," continued the magistrate. "Have you any acquaintances in Paris? Can you indicate any respectable person who will vouch for the truth of this story?"

"Ah! sir, it is seventeen years since I left France."

"That is unfortunate, but the prosecution cannot content itself with such an explanation. What about your last employer, M. Simpson. Who was he?"

"M. Simpson is a rich man," replied the prisoner, rather coldly, "worth more than two hundred thousand francs, and honest besides. In Germany he travelled with a show of marionettes, and in England with a collection of phenomena to suit the tastes of that country."

"Very well! Then this millionaire could testify in your favour; it would be easy to find him, I suppose."

"Certainly," responded May, emphatically. "M. Simpson would willingly do me this favour. It would not be difficult to find him, only it would require considerable time."

"Why?"

"Because at the present moment he must be on his way to America. It was on account of this journey that I left his company—I detest the ocean."

A moment previously Lecoq's anxiety had been so intense, that his heart almost stopped beating; on hearing these last words, however, he regained all his self-possession. As for the magistrate, he merely greeted the murderer's reply with a brief but significant ejaculation.

"When I say that he is on his way," resumed the prisoner, "I may be mistaken. He may not have started yet, though he had certainly made all his arrangements before we separated."

"What ship was he to sail by?"

"He did not tell me."

"Where was he when you left him?"

"At Leipsic."

"When was this?"

"Last Wednesday."

M. Segmuller shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. "So you say you were in Leipsic on Wednesday? How long have you been in Paris?"

"Since Sunday afternoon, at four o'clock."

"It will be necessary to prove that."

Judging by the murderer's contracted brow it might be conjectured that he was making a strenuous effort to remember something. He cast questioning glances first towards the ceiling and then towards the floor, scratching his head and tapping his foot in evident perplexity. "How can I prove it—how?" he murmured.

The magistrate did not appear disposed to wait. "Let me assist you," said he. "The people at the inn where you boarded while in Leipsic must remember you."

"We did not stop at an inn."

"Where did you eat and sleep, then?"

In M. Simpson's large travelling-carriage; it had been sold, but he was not to give it up until he reached the port he was to sail from."

"What port was that?"

"I don't know."

At this reply Lecoq, who had less experience than the magistrate in the art of concealing one's impressions, could not help rubbing his hands with satisfaction. The prisoner was plainly convicted of falsehood, indeed driven into a corner.

"So you have only your own word to offer in support of this story?" inquired M. Segmuller.

"Wait a moment," said the prisoner, extending his arm as if to clutch at a still vague inspiration—"wait a moment. When I arrived in Paris I had with me a trunk containing my clothes. The linen is all marked with the first letter of my name, and besides some ordinary coats and trousers, there were a couple of costumes I used to wear when I appeared in public."

"Well, what have you done with all these things?"

"When I arrived in Paris, I took the trunk to a hotel, close by the Northern railway station—"

"Go on. Tell us the name of this hotel?" said M. Segmuller, perceiving that the prisoner had stopped short, evidently embarrassed.

"That's just what I'm trying to recollect. I've forgotten it. But I haven't forgotten the house. I fancy I can see it now; and, if some one would only take me to the neighbourhood, I should certainly recognize it. The people at the hotel would know me, and besides, my trunk would prove the truth of what I've told you."

On hearing this statement, Lecoq mentally resolved to make a tour of investigation through the various hotels surrounding the Gare du Nord.

"Very well," retorted the magistrate. "Perhaps we will do as you request. Now, there are two questions I desire to ask. If you arrived in Paris at four o'clock in the afternoon, how did it happen that by midnight of the same day you had discovered the Poivrière, which is merely frequented by suspicious characters, and is situated in such a lonely spot that it would be impossible to find it at night-time, if one were not familiar with the surrounding localities? In the second place, how does it happen, if you possess such clothing as you describe, that you are so poorly dressed?"

The prisoner smiled at these questions. "I can easily explain that," he replied. "One's clothes are soon spoiled when one travels third-class, so on leaving Leipsic I put on the worst things I had. When I arrived here, and felt my feet on the pavement of Paris, I went literally wild with delight.

I acted like a fool. I had some money in my pocket—it was Shrove Sunday—and my only thought was to make a night of it. I did not think of changing my clothes. As I had formerly been in the habit of amusing myself round about the *Barrière d'Italie*, I hastened there, and entered a wine-shop. While I was eating a morsel, two men came in and began talking about spending the night at a ball at the Rainbow. I asked them to take me with them; they agreed, I paid their bill, and we started. But soon after our arrival these young men left me and joined the dancers. It was not long before I grew weary of merely looking on. Rather disappointed, I left the inn, and being foolish enough not to ask my way, I wandered on till I lost myself, while traversing a tract of unoccupied land. I was about to go back, when I saw a light in the distance. I walked straight towards it, and reached that cursed hovel."

"What happened then?"

"Oh? I went in; called for some one. A woman came downstairs, and I asked her for a glass of brandy. When she brought it, I sat down and lighted a cigar. Then I looked about me. The interior was almost enough to frighten one. Three men and two women were drinking and chatting in low tones at another table. My face did not seem to suit them. One of them got up, came towards me, and said: 'You are a police-agent; you've come here to play the spy; that's very plain.' I answered that I wasn't a police-agent. He replied that I was. I again declared that I wasn't. In short, he swore that he was sure of it, and that my beard was false. So saying, he caught hold of my beard and pulled it. This made me mad. I jumped up, and with a blow of my fist I felled him to the ground. In an instant all the others were upon me! I had my revolver—you know the rest."

"And while all this was going on, what were the two women doing?"

"Ah! I was too busy to pay any attention to them. They disappeared!"

"But you saw them when you entered the place—what were they like?"

"Oh! they were two big, ugly creatures, as tall as grenadiers, and as dark as moles!"

Between plausible falsehood, and improbable truth, justice—human justice, and therefore liable to error—is compelled to decide as best it can. For the past hour M. Segmuller had not been free from mental disquietude. But all his doubts vanished when he heard the prisoner declare that the two women were tall and dark. If he had said: "The women were fair," M. Segmuller would not have known what to believe, but in the magistrate's opinion the audacious falsehood he had just heard, proved that there was a perfect understanding between the supposed murderer and the Widow Chupin.

Certainly, M. Segmuller's satisfaction was great; but his face did not betray it. It was of the utmost importance that the prisoner should believe that he had succeeded in deceiving his examiner. "You must understand how necessary it is to find these women," said the magistrate kindly. "If their testimony corresponds with your allegations, your innocence will be proved conclusively."

"Yes, I understand that; but how can I put my hand upon them?"

"The police can assist you—our agents are always at the service of prisoners who desire to make use of them in establishing their innocence. Did you make any observations which might aid in the discovery of these women?"

Lecoq, whose eyes never wandered from the prisoner's face, fancied that he saw the faint shadow of a smile on the man's lips.

"I remarked nothing," said the prisoner coldly.

M. Segmuller had opened the drawer of his desk a moment before. He now drew from it the earring which had been found on the scene of the tragedy, and handing it abruptly to the prisoner, he asked: "So you didn't notice this in the ear of one of the women?"

The prisoner's imperturbable coolness of demeanour did not forsake him. He took the jewel in his hand, examined it attentively held it up to the light, admired its brilliant scintillations and said: "It is a very handsome, stone, but I didn't notice it."

"This stone," remarked the magistrate, "is a diamond."

"Ah!"

"Yes; and worth several thousand francs."

"So much as that!"

This exclamation may have been in accordance with the spirit of the part assumed by the prisoner; though, at the same time, its simplicity was undoubtedly far-fetched. It was strange that a nomad, such as the murderer pretended to have been, acquainted with most of the countries and capitals of Europe, should have displayed this astonishment on learning the value of a diamond. Still, M. Segmuller did not seem to notice the discrepancy.

"Another thing," said he. "When you threw down your pistol, crying; 'Come and take me,' what did you intend to do?"

"I intended to make my escape."

"In what way?"

"Why, of course by the door, sir—by——"

"Yes, by the back door," retorted the magistrate, with freezing irony. "It remains for you to explain, how you—you who had just entered that hotel for the first time—could have known of this door's existence."

For once, in the course of the examination, the prisoner seemed troubled. For an instant all his assurance forsook him. He evidently perceived the danger of his position, and after a considerable effort he contrived to burst out in a laugh. His laugh was a poor one, however, it rang false, and failed to conceal a sensation of deep anxiety. Growing gradually bolder, he at length exclaimed: "That's nonsense, I had just seen these two women go out by that very door."

"Excuse me, you declared a minute ago that you did not see these women leave: that you were too busy to watch their movements."

"Did I say that?"

"Word for word; the passage shall be shown you. Goguet, find it."

The clerk at once read the passage referred to, whereupon the prisoner undertook to show that his remark had been misunderstood. "He had not said—at least, he did not intend to say—that, they had quite misinterpreted his words." With such remarks did he try to palliate the effect of his apparent blunders.

In the meanwhile, Lecoq was jubilant. "Ah! my fine fellow," thought he, "you are contradicting yourself—you are in deep water already—you are lost. There's no hope for you."

The prisoner's situation was indeed not unlike that of a bather, who, unable to swim, imprudently advances into the sea until the water rises above his chin. He may for a while have preserved his equilibrium despite the buffeting of the waves but now he totters, loses his footing—another second, and he will sink!

"Enough—enough!" said the magistrate, cutting the prisoner's embarrassed explanations short. "Now, if you started out merely with the in-

tention of amusing yourself, how did it happen that you took your revolver with you?"

"I had it with me while I was travelling, and did not think of leaving it at the hotel any more than I thought of changing my clothes."

"Where did you purchase it?"

"It was given me by M. Simpson as a souvenir."

"Confess that this M. Simpson is a very convenient personage," said the magistrate coldly. "Still, go on with your story. Only two chambers of this murderous weapon were discharged, but three men were killed. You have not told me the end of the affair."

"What's the use?" exclaimed the prisoner, in saddened tones. "Two of my assailants had fallen; the struggle became an equal one. I seized the remaining man, the soldier, round the body, and threw him down. He fell against a corner of the table, and did not rise again."

M. Segmuller had unfolded upon his desk the plan of the Poivrière, drawn by Lecoq. "Come here," he said, addressing the prisoner, "and show me on this paper the precise spot you and your adversaries occupied."

May obeyed, and with an assurance of manner a little surprising in a man in his position, he proceeded to explain the drama. "I entered," said he, "by this door, marked C; I seated myself at the table, H, to the left of the entrance: my assailants occupied the table between the fireplace, F, and the window, B."

"I must admit," said the magistrate, "that your assertions fully agree with the statements of the physicians, who say that one of the shots must have been fired about a yard off, and the other about two yards off."

This was a victory for the prisoner, but he only shrugged his shoulders and murmured: "That proves that the physicians knew their business."

Lecoq was delighted. This part of the prisoner's narrative not merely agreed with the doctor's statements, but also confirmed his own researches. The young detective felt that, had he been the examiner, he would have conducted the investigation in precisely the same way. Accordingly, he thanked heaven that M. Segmuller had supplied the place of M. d'Escorval.

"This admitted," resumed the magistrate, "it remains for you to explain a sentence you uttered when the agent, you see here, arrested you."

"What sentence?"

"You exclaimed: 'Ah, it's the Prussians who are coming; I'm lost!' What did you mean by that?"

A fleeting crimson tinge suffused the prisoner's cheek. It was evident that if he had anticipated the other questions, and had been prepared for them, this one at least, was unexpected. "It's very strange," said he, with ill-disguised embarrassment, "that I should have said such a thing!"

"Five persons heard you," insisted the magistrate.

The prisoner did not immediately reply. He was evidently trying to gain time, ransacking in his mind for a plausible explanation. "After all," he ultimately said, "the thing's quite possible. When I was with M. Simpson, we had with us an old soldier who had belonged to Napoleon's body guard and had fought at Waterloo. I recollect he was always repeating that phrase. I must have caught the habit from him."

This explanation, though rather slow in coming, was none the less ingenious. At least, M. Segmuller appeared to be perfectly satisfied. "That's very plausible," said he; "but there is one circumstance that passes my comprehension. Were you freed from your assailants before the police entered the place? Answer me, yes or no."

"Yes."

"Then, why, instead of making your escape by the back door, the existence of which you had divined, did you remain on the threshold of the door, leading into the back room, with a table before you to serve as a barricade, and your revolver levelled at the police, as if to keep them at bay?"

The prisoner hung his head, and the magistrate had to wait for his answer. "I was a fool," he stammered at last. "I didn't know whether these men were police-agents, or friends of the fellows I had killed."

"In either case, your own interest should have induced you to fly."

The prisoner remained silent.

"Ah, well!" resumed M. Segmuller, "let me tell you my opinion. I believe you designedly and voluntarily exposed yourself to the danger of being arrested in order to protect the retreat of the two women who had just left."

"Why should I have risked my own safety for two hussies I did not even know?"

"Excuse me. The prosecution is strongly inclined to believe that you know these two women very well."

"I should like to see anyone prove that!" So saying the prisoner smiled sneeringly, but at once changed countenance when the magistrate retorted in a tone of assurance, "I will prove it."

XII.

MAGISTRATES are frequently non-plussed when dealing with these difficult and delicate questions of personal identity. Railroads, photography, and telegraphic communication have multiplied the means of investigation in vain. Every day it happens that criminals succeed in deceiving justice in regard to their true personality, and thus escape the consequences of former crimes. This is indeed so frequently the case that an eminent French public prosecutor once ventured to remark: "Uncertainty as regards a criminal's identity will only cease when the law prescribes the branding of a number on the shoulder of every child whose birth is reported to the mayor."

M. Segmuller certainly wished that a number had been branded upon the enigmatical prisoner before him. And yet he did not by any means despair, and his confidence, exaggerated though it might be, was not at all feigned. He was of opinion that the weakest point of the prisoner's defence so far, was his pretended ignorance concerning the two women. He proposed to return to this subject later on. In the meanwhile, however, there were other matters to be dealt with.

When he felt that his threat as regards the women had had time to produce its full effect, the magistrate continued: "So, prisoner, you assert that you were acquainted with none of the persons you met at the Poirvière."

"I swear it."

"Have you never had occasion to meet a person called Lacheneur, an individual whose name is connected with this unfortunate affair?"

"I heard the name for the first time when it was pronounced by the dying soldier. Poor fellow? I had just dealt him his death blow; and yet his last words testified to my innocence."

This sentimental outburst produced no impression whatever upon the

magistrate. "In that case," said he, "I suppose you are willing to accept this soldier's statement."

The man hesitated, as if conscious that he had fallen into a snare, and that he would be obliged to weigh each answer carefully. "I accept it," said he, at last. "Of course I accept it."

"Very well, then. This soldier, as you must recollect, wished to revenge himself on Lacheneur, who, by promising him a sum of money, had inveigled him into a conspiracy. A conspiracy against whom? Evidently against you; and yet you pretend that you had only arrived in Paris that evening, and that mere chance brought you to the Poivrière. Can you reconcile such conflicting statements?"

The prisoner had the hardihood to shrug his shoulders, disdainfully. "I see the matter in an entirely different light," said he. "These people were plotting mischief against I don't know whom—and it was because I was in their way that they sought a quarrel with me, without any cause whatever."

Skilfully as the magistrate had delivered this thrust, it had been as skilfully parried; so skilfully, indeed, that Goguet, the smiling clerk, could not conceal an approving grimace. Besides, on principle, he always took the prisoner's part, in a mild, platonic way, of course.

"Let us consider the circumstances that followed your arrest," resumed M. Segmuller. "Why did you refuse to answer all the questions put to you?"

A gleam of real or assumed resentment shone in the prisoner's eyes. "This examination," he growled, "will alone suffice to make a culprit out of an innocent man!"

"I advise you, in your own interest, to behave properly. Those who arrested you observed that you were conversant with all the prison formalities and rules."

"Ah! sir, haven't I told you that I have been arrested and put in prison several times—always on account of my papers. I told you the truth, and you shouldn't taunt me for having done so."

The prisoner had dropped his mask of careless gaiety, and had assumed a surly, discontented tone. But his troubles were by no means ended; in fact, the battle had only just begun. Laying a tiny linen bag on his desk, M. Segmuller asked him if he recognised it.

"Perfectly! It is the package that the governor of the Dépôt placed in his safe."

The magistrate opened the bag, and poured the dust that it contained on to a sheet of paper. "You are aware, prisoner," said he, "that this dust comes from the mud that was sticking to your feet. The police-agent who collected it has been to the station-house where you spent the night of the murder, and has discovered that the composition of this dust is identical with that of the floor of the cell you occupied."

The prisoner listened with gaping mouth.

"Hence," continued the magistrate, "it was certainly at the station-house, and *designedly*, that you soiled your feet with that mud. In doing so you had an object."

"I wished—"

"Let me finish. Being determined to keep your identity secret, and to assume the character of a member of the lower classes—of a mountebank, if you please—you reflected that the care you bestow upon your person might betray you. You foresaw the impression that would be caused when

the coarse, ill-fitting boots you wore were removed, and the officials perceived your trim clean feet which are as well kept as your hands. Accordingly, what did you do? You poured some of the water that was in the pitcher in your cell on to the ground, and then dabbled your feet in the mud that had thus been formed."

During these remarks, the prisoner's face wore, by turns, an expression of anxiety, astonishment, irony, and mirth. When the magistrate had finished, he burst into a hearty laugh.

"So that's the result of twelve or fourteen hours' research," he at length exclaimed, turning towards Lecoq. "Ah! Mr. Agent, it's good to be sharp, but not so sharp as that. The truth is, that when I was taken to the station-house, forty-eight hours—thirty-six of them spent in a railway carriage—had elapsed since I had taken off my boots. My feet were red and swollen, and they burned like fire. What did I do? I poured some water over them. As for your other suspicions, if I have a soft white skin, it is only because I take care of myself. Besides, as is usual with most men in my profession, I rarely wear anything but slippers on my feet. This is so true, that on leaving Leipsic, I only owned a single pair of boots, and that was an old cast-off pair given me by M. Simpson."

Lecoq struck his chest. "Fool, imbecile, idiot, that I am!" he thought. "He was waiting to be questioned about this circumstance. He is so wonderfully shrewd, that when he saw me take this dust, he divined my intentions; and since then he has managed to concoct this story—a plausible story enough—and one that any jury would believe."

M. Segmuller was saying the same thing to himself. But he was not so surprised nor so overcome by the skill the prisoner had displayed in fencing with this point. "Let us continue," said he. "Do you still persist in your statements, prisoner?"

"Yes."

"Very well; then I shall be forced to tell you that what you are saying is untrue."

The prisoner's lips trembled visibly, and it was with difficulty that he faltered: "May my first mouthful of bread strangle me, if I have uttered a single falsehood!"

"A single falsehood!—wait."

The magistrate drew from the drawer of his desk the moulds of the foot-prints, prepared by Lecoq, and showing them to the murderer, he said: "You told me a few minutes ago that the two women were as tall as grenadiers; now, just look at the foot-prints made by these female giants. They were as 'dark as moles,' you said; a witness will tell you that one of them was a small, delicate featured blonde, with an exceedingly sweet voice." He sought the prisoner's eyes, gazed steadily into them, and added slowly: "And this witness is the driver whose cab was hired in the Rue de Chevaleret by the two fugitives, both short, fair-haired women."

This sentence fell like a thunderbolt upon the prisoner; he grew pale, tottered, and leant against the wall for support.

"Ah! you have told me the truth!" scornfully continued the pitiless magistrate. "Then, who is this man who was waiting for you while you were at the Poirvière? Who is this accomplice who, after your arrest, dared to enter the Widow Chupin's den to regain possession of some compromising object—no doubt a letter—which he knew he would find in the pocket of the Widow Chupin's apron? Who is this devoted, courageous friend who feigned drunkenness so effectually that even the police were deceived, and

thoughtlessly placed him in confinement with you? Dare you deny that you have not arranged your system of defence in concert with him? Can you affirm that he did not give the Widow Chupin counsel as to the course she should pursue?"

But already, thanks to his power of self-control, the prisoner had mastered his agitation. "All this," said he, in a harsh voice, "is a mere invention of the police!"

However faithfully one may describe an examination of this kind, a narrative can convey no more idea of the real scene than a heap of cold ashes can give the effect of a glowing fire. One can note down each word, each ejaculation, but phraseology is powerless to portray the repressed animation, the impassioned movements, the studied reticence, the varied tones of voice, the now bold, now faltering glances full of hatred and suspicion which follow each other in rapid succession mostly on the prisoner's side, but not entirely so, for although the magistrate may be an adept in the art of concealing his feelings, at times nature cannot be controlled.

When the prisoner reeled beneath the magistrate's last words, the latter could not control his feelings. "He yields," he thought, "he succumbs—he is mine!"

But all hope of immediate success vanished when M. Segnüller saw his redoubtable adversary struggle against his momentary weakness, and arm himself for the fight with renewed, and, if possible, even greater energy. The magistrate perceived that it would require more than one assault to overcome such a stubborn nature. So, in a voice rendered still more harsh by disappointment, he resumed: "It is plain that you are determined to deny evidence itself."

The prisoner had recovered all his self-possession. He must have bitterly regretted his weakness, for a fiendish spite glittered in his eyes. "What evidence!" he asked, frowning. "This romance invented by the police is very plausible, I don't deny it; but it seems to me that the truth is quite as probable. You talk to me about a cabman whose vehicle was hired by two short, fair haired women; but who can prove that these women were the same that fled from the Poivrière?"

"The police-agent, you see here, followed the tracks they left across the snow."

"Ah! at night time—across fields intersected by ditches, and up a long street—a fine rain falling all the while, and a thaw already beginning! Oh, your story is very probable!"

As he spoke, the murderer extended his arm towards Lecoq, and then, in a tone of crushing scorn, he added: "A man must have great confidence in himself, or a wild longing for advancement, to try and get a man guillotined on such evidence as that!"

At these words, Goguet, the smiling clerk, whose pen was rapidly flying across the paper, could not help remarking to himself: "The arrow has entered the bull's eye this time!"

The comment was not without foundation: for Lecoq was evidently cut to the quick. Indeed, he was so incensed, that forgetful of his subordinate position, he sprang to his feet exclaiming: "This circumstance would be of slight importance, if it were not one of a long chain—"

"Be good enough to keep silent, interrupted the magistrate, who, turning to the prisoner, added: "The court does not utilize the proofs and testimony collected by the police until it has examined and weighed them."

"No matter," murmured the prisoner. "I should like to see this cab-driver."

"Have no fear about that; he shall repeat his evidence in your presence."

"Very well. I am satisfied then. I will ask him how he can distinguish people's faces when it is as dark as—"

He checked himself, apparently enlightened by a sudden inspiration. "How stupid I am!" he exclaimed. "I'm losing my temper about these people when you know all the while who they are. For of course the cabman drove them home."

M. Segmuller saw that the prisoner understood him. He perceived, moreover, that the latter was doing all he could to increase the mystery that enshrouded this essential point of the case—a point upon which the prosecution was particularly anxious to obtain information.

The prisoner was truly an incomparable comedian, for his last observation was made in a tone of remarkable candour, just tinged with sufficient irony to show that he felt he had nothing to fear in this direction.

"If you are consistent with yourself," remarked the magistrate, "you will also deny the existence of an accomplice, of a—comrade."

"What would be the use denying it, since you believe nothing that I say? Only a moment ago you insinuated that my former employer was an imaginary personage; so what need I say about my pretended accomplice? According to your agents, he's at all events a most faithful friend. Indeed, this wonderful being—invented by Monsieur—(with these words the prisoner pointed to Lecoq) was seemingly not satisfied at having once escaped the police, for, according to your account, he voluntarily placed himself in their clutches a second time. You gentlemen pretend that he conferred first of all with me, and next with the Widow Chupin. How did that happen? Perhaps after removing him from my cell, some of your agents obligingly shut him up with the old woman."

Goguet the clerk wrote all this down admiringly. "Here," thought he, "is a man of brain, who understands his case. He won't need any lawyer's eloquence to put his defence favourably before a jury."

"And after all," continued the prisoner, "what are the proofs against me? The name of Lacheneur, faltered by a dying man; a few foot-prints on some melting snow; a sleepy cab-driver's declaration; and a vague doubt about a drunkard's identity. If that's all you have against me, it certainly doesn't amount to much—"

"Enough!" interrupted M. Segmuller. "Your assurance is perfect now; though a moment ago your embarrassment was most remarkable. What was the cause of it?"

"The cause!" indignantly exclaimed the prisoner, whom this query had seemingly enraged; "the cause! Can't you see, sir, that you are torturing me frightfully, pitilessly! I am an innocent man, and you are trying to deprive me of my life. You have been turning me this way and that way for so many hours, that I begin to feel as if I were standing on the guillotine. Each time I open my mouth to speak I ask myself, is it this answer that will send me to the scaffold? My anxiety and dismay surprise you, do they? Why, since this examination began, I've felt the cold knife graze my neck, at least twenty times. I wouldn't like my worst enemy to be subjected to such torture as this."

The prisoner's description of his sufferings did not seem at all exaggerated. His hair was saturated with perspiration, and big drops of sweat rested on his palled brow, or coursed down his cheeks on to his beard.

"I am not your enemy," said the magistrate more gently. "A magistrate is neither a prisoner's friend nor enemy, he is simply the friend of truth and the executor of the law. I am not seeking either for an innocent man or for a culprit; I merely wish to arrive at the truth. I must know who you are—and I do know—"

"Ah!—if the assertion costs me my life—I'm May and none other."

"No, you are not."

"Who am I, then? Some great man in disguise? Ah! I wish I were! In that case, I should have satisfactory papers to show you; and then you would set me free, for you know very well, my good sir, that I am as innocent as you are."

The magistrate had left his desk, and taken a seat by the fire-place, within a yard of the prisoner. "Do not insist," said he. Then, suddenly changing both manner and tone, he added with the urbanity that a man of the world displays, when addressing an equal: "Do me the honour, sir, to believe me gifted with sufficient perspicuity to recognize, under the difficult part you play to such perfection, a very superior gentleman—a man endowed with remarkable talents."

Lecoq perceived that this sudden change of manner had unnerved the prisoner. He tried to laugh, but his merriment partook somewhat of the nature of a sob, and big tears glistened in his eyes.

"I will not torture you any longer," continued the magistrate. "In subtle reasoning I confess that you have conquered me. However, when I return to the charge I shall have proofs enough in my possession to crush you."

He reflected for a moment, then lingering over each word, he added; "Only do not then expect from me the consideration I have shown you to-day. Justice is human; that is, she is indulgent towards certain crimes. She has fathomed the depth of the abyss into which blind passion may hurl even an honest man. To-day, I freely offer you any assistance that will not conflict with my duty. Speak. Shall I send this officer of police away? Would you like me to send my clerk out of the room, on an errand?" He said no more, but waited to see the effect of this last effort.

The prisoner darted upon him one of those searching glances that seem to pierce an adversary through. His lips moved; one might have supposed that he was about to make a revelation. But no; suddenly he crossed his arms over his chest, and murmured: "You are very frank, sir. Unfortunately for me, I'm only a poor devil, as I've already told you. My name is May and I earn my living by speaking to the public and turning a compliment."

"I am forced to yield to your decision," said the magistrate sadly. "The clerk will now read the minutes of your examination—listen."

While Goguet read the evidence aloud, the prisoner listened without making any remark, but when asked to sign the document, he obstinately refused to do so, fearing, he said, "some hidden treachery."

A moment afterwards the soldiers who had escorted him to the magistrate's room, conducted him back to the Dépôt.

XIII.

WHEN the prisoner had gone. M. Segmuller sank back in his arm-chair, literally exhausted. He was in that state of nervous prostration which so

often follows protracted but fruitless efforts. He had scarcely strength enough to bathe his burning forehead and gleaming eyes, with cool refreshing water. This frightful examination had lasted no less than seven consecutive hours.

The smiling clerk, who had kept his place at his desk, busily writing the whole while, now rose to his feet, glad of an opportunity to stretch his limbs, and snap his fingers, cramped by holding the pen. Still, he was not in the least degree bored. He invariably took a semi-theatrical interest in the dramas that were daily enacted in his presence; his excitement being all the greater owing to the uncertainty that shrouded the finish of the final act—a finish that only too often belied the ordinary rules and deductions of writers for the stage.

"What a knave!" he exclaimed after vainly waiting for the magistrate or the detective to express an opinion, "what a rascal!"

M. Segmuller ordinarily put considerable confidence in his clerk's long experience. He sometimes even went so far as to consult him, doubtless somewhat in the same style that Molière consulted his servant. But, on this occasion he did not accept his opinion.

"No," said he in a thoughtful tone, "that man is not a knave. When I spoke to him kindly he was really touched; he wept, he hesitated. I could have sworn that he was about to tell me everything."

"Ah he's a man of wonderful power!" observed Lecoq.

The detective was sincere in his praise. Although the prisoner had disappointed his plans, and had even insulted him, he could not help admiring his shrewdness and courage. He—Lecoq—had prepared himself for a strenuous struggle with this man, and he hoped to conquer in the end. Nevertheless in his secret soul he felt for his adversary, admiring that sympathy which a "foeman worthy of one's steel" always inspires.

"What coolness, what courage!" continued the young detective. "Ah! there's no denying it, his system of defence—of absolute denial—is a master-piece. It is perfect. How well he played that difficult part of buffoon! At times I could scarcely restrain my admiration. What is a famous comedian beside that fellow? The greatest actors need the adjunct of stage scenery to support the illusion, whereas, this man, entirely unaided, almost convinced me even against my reason."

"Do you know what your very appropriate criticism proves?" inquired the magistrate.

"I am listening, sir."

"Ah, well! I have arrived at this conclusion—either this man is really May, the stroller, earning his living by paying compliments, as he says—or else he belongs to the highest rank of society, and not to the middle classes. It is only in the lowest or in the highest ranks that you encounter such grim energy as he has displayed, such scorn of life, as well as such remarkable presence of mind and resolution. A vulgar tradesman attracted to the Poivrière by some shameful passion would have confessed it long ago."

"But sir, this man is surely not the buffoon, May," replied the young detective.

"No, certainly not," responded M. Segmuller; "we must, therefore, decide upon some plan of action." He smiled kindly, and added, in a friendly voice: "It was unnecessary to tell you that, Monsieur Lecoq. Quite unnecessary, since to you belongs the honour of having detected this fraud. As for myself, I confess, that if I had not been warned in advance, I should have been the dupe of this clever artist's talent."

The young detective bowed ; a blush of modesty tinged his cheeks, but a gleam of pleased vanity sparkled in his eyes. What a difference between this friendly, benevolent magistrate, and M. d'Escorval, so taciturn and haughty. This man, at least, understood, appreciated, and encouraged him ; and it was with a common theory, and an equal ardour that they were about to devote themselves to a search for the truth. Scarcely had Lecoq allowed these thoughts to flit across his mind, than he reflected that his satisfaction was, after all, a trifle premature, and that success was still extremely doubtful. With this chilling conclusion, presence of mind returned. Turning towards the magistrate, he exclaimed : "You will recollect, sir, that the Widow Chupin mentioned a son of hers, a certain Polyte——"

"Yes."

"Why not question him ? He must know all the frequenters of the Poivrière, and might perhaps give us valuable information regarding Gustave, Lacheneur, and the murderer himself. As he is not in solitary confinement, he has probably heard of his mother's arrest ; but it seems to me impossible that he should suspect our present perplexity."

"Ah ! you are a hundred times right !" exclaimed the magistrate. "I ought to have thought of that myself. In his position he can scarcely have been tampered with as yet, and I'll have him up here to-morrow morning ; I will also question his wife." Turning to his clerk, M. Segmuller added : "Quick, Goguet, prepare a summons in the name of the wife of Hippolyte Chupin, and address an order to the governor of the Dépôt to produce her husband !"

But night was coming on. It was already too dark to see to write, and accordingly the clerk rang the bell for lights. Just as the messenger who brought the lamps turned to leave the room, a rap was heard at the door. Immediately afterwards the governor of the Dépôt entered.

During the past twenty-four hours, this worthy functionary had been greatly perplexed concerning the mysterious prisoner he had placed in secret cell No. 3, and he now came to the magistrate for advice regarding him. "I come to ask," said he, "if I am still to retain the prisoner, May, in solitary confinement ?"

"Yes."

"Although I fear fresh attacks of frenzy, I dislike to confine him in the strait-jacket again."

"Leave him free in his cell," replied M. Segmuller, "and tell the keepers to watch him well, but to treat him kindly."

By the provisions of Article 613 of the Code, accused parties are placed in the custody of the government, but the investigating magistrate is allowed to adopt such measures concerning them as he may deem necessary for the interests of the prosecution.

The governor bowed assent to M. Segmuller's instructions, and then added : "You have doubtless succeeded in establishing the prisoner's identity."

"Unfortunately, I have not."

The governor shook his head with a knowing air. "In that case," said he, "my conjectures were correct. It seems to me evident that this man is a criminal of the worst description—an old offender certainly, and one who has the strongest interest in concealing his identity. You will find that you have to deal with a man who has been sentenced to the galleys for life, and who has managed to escape from Cayenne."

"Perhaps you are mistaken."

"Hum ! I shall be greatly surprised if such should prove the case. I

must admit that my opinion in this matter is identical with that of M. Gérol, the most experienced and the most skilful of our inspectors. I agree with him in thinking that young detectives are often over-zealous, and run after phantoms originated in their own brains."

Lecoq, crimson with wrath, was about to make an angry response, when M. Segmuller motioned to him to remain silent. Then with a smile on his face the magistrate replied to the governor. "Upon my word, my dear friend," he said, "the more I study this affair, the more convinced I am of the correctness of the theory advanced by the 'over-zealous detective.' But, after all, I am not infallible, and I shall depend upon your counsel and assistance."

"Oh! I have means of verifying my assertion," interrupted the governor; "and I hope before the end of the next twenty-four hours that our man will have been identified, either by the police or by one of his fellow-prisoners."

With these words he took his leave. Scarcely had he done so, than Lecoq sprang to his feet. The young detective was furious. "You see that Gérol already speaks ill of me; he is jealous."

"Ah, well! what does that matter to you? If you succeed, you will have your revenge. If you are mistaken—then I am mistaken, too."

Then, as it was already late, M. Segmuller confided to Lecoq's keeping the various articles the latter had accumulated in support of his theory. He also placed in his hands the diamond earring, the owner of which must be discovered; and the letter signed "Lacheneur," which had been found in the pocket of the spurious soldier. Having given him full instructions, he asked him to make his appearance promptly on the morrow, and then dismissed him, saying: "Now go; and may good luck attend you!"

XIV.

Long, narrow, and low of ceiling, having on the one side a row of windows looking on to a small court-yard, and on the other a range of doors, each with a number on its central panel, thus reminding one of some corridor in a second rate hotel, such is the Galerie d'Instruction at the Palais de Justice whereby admittance is gained into the various rooms occupied by the investigating magistrates. Even in the day-time, when it is thronged with prisoners, witnesses, and guards, it is a sad and gloomy place. But it is absolutely sinister of aspect at night-time, when deserted, and only dimly lighted by the smoky lamp of a solitary attendant, waiting for the departure of some magistrate whom business has detained later than usual.

Although Lecoq was not sensitive to such influences, he made haste to reach the staircase and thus escape the echo of his footsteps which sounded most drearily in the silence and darkness pervading the gallery.

Finding an open window on the floor below, he looked out to ascertain the state of the weather. The temperature was much milder; the snow had altogether disappeared, and the pavement was almost dry. A slight haze, illumined by the ruddy glare of the street lamps, hung like a purple mantle over the city. The streets below were full of animation: vehicles were rolling rapidly to and fro, and the footways were too narrow for the bustling crowd, which, now that the labours of the day were ended, was hastening homeward or in search of pleasure.

The sight drew a sigh from the young detective. "And it is in this

"You shall know in half-an-hour," replied the young detective, realising that further persuasion would be useless.

He hastily left the room, ran to the Place de Roubaix, jumped into a cab, and giving the driver the address of the district commissary of police, promised him a hundred sous over and above the regular fare if he would only make haste. As might have been expected under such circumstances, the poor horse fairly flew over the ground.

Lecoq was fortunate enough to find the commissary at his office. Having given his name, he was immediately ushered into the magistrate's presence and told his story in a few words.

"It is really true that they came to inform me of this man's disappearance," said the commissary. "Casimir told me about it this morning."

"They—came—to inform—you——" faltered Lecoq.

"Yes, yesterday; but I have had so much to occupy my time. Now, my man, "how can I serve you?"

"Come with me, sir; compel them to show us the trunk, and send for a locksmith to open it. Here is the authority—a search warrant given me by the investigating magistrate to use in case of necessity. Let us lose no time. I have a cab at the door."

"We will start at once," said the commissary.

The driver whipped up his horse once more, and they were soon rapidly rolling in the direction of the Rue St. Quentin.

"Now, sir," said the young detective, "permit me to ask if you know this woman who keeps the Hôtel de Mariembourg?"

"Yes, indeed, I know her very well. When I was first appointed to this district, six years ago, I was a bachelor, and for a long while, I took my meals at her table d'hôte, Casimir, my secretary, boards there even now."

"And what kind of a woman is she?"

"Why, upon my word, my young friend, Madame Milner—for such is her name—is a very respectable widow (highly esteemed by her neighbours) and having a very prosperous business. If she remains a widow, it is only from choice, for she is very prepossessing and has plenty of suitors."

"Then you don't think her capable of serving, for the sake of a good round sum, the interests of some wealthy culprit?"

"Have you gone mad?" interrupted the commissary. "What, Madame Milner perjure herself for the sake of money! Haven't I just told you that she is an honest woman, and that she is very well off! Besides, she informed me yesterday that this man was missing, so——"

Lecoq made no reply; the driver was pulling up; they had reached their destination.

On seeing her obstinate questioner re-appear, accompanied by the commissary, Madame Milner seemed to understand everything.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed, "a detective! I might have guessed it? Some crime has been committed; and now my hotel has lost its reputation forever!"

While a messenger was despatched for a locksmith, the commissary endeavoured to re-assure and console her, a task of no little difficulty, and which he was some time in accomplishing.

At last they all went up to the missing man's room, and Lecoq sprang towards the trunk. Ah! there was no denying it. It had, indeed, come from Leipsic; as the labels pasted upon it by the different railroad companies, only too plainly proved. On being opened, it was, moreover, found to contain the various articles mentioned by the prisoner.

Lecoq was thunderstruck. When he had seen the commissary lock the trunk and its contents up in a cupboard and take possession of the key, he felt he could endure nothing more. He left the room with downcast head ; and stumbled like a drunken man as he went down the stairs.

XV.

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But the young detective had no heart for pleasure. He mingled with the crowd without seemingly seeing it, and jostled against groups of people chatting at the corners, without hearing the imprecations occasioned by his awkwardness. Where was he going ? He had no idea. He walked on aimlessly, more disconsolate and desperate than the gambler who has staked his last hope with his last louis, and lost.

"I must yield," he murmured ; "this evidence is conclusive. My presumptions were only chimeras ; my deductions the playthings of chance ! All I can now do is to withdraw, with the least possible damage and ridicule, from the false position I have assumed."

Just as he reached the boulevard, however, a new idea entered his brain, an idea of so startling a kind, that he could scarcely restrain a loud exclamation of surprise. "What a fool I am !" cried he, striking his hand violently against his forehead. "Is it possible to be so strong in theory, and yet so ridiculously weak in practice. Ah ! I am only a child, a mere novice, disheartened by the slightest obstacle. I meet with a difficulty, and at once I lose all my courage. Now, let me reflect calmly. What did tell the judge about this murderer, whose plan of defence so puzzles us. Did I not tell him that we had to deal with a man of superior talent—with a man of consummate penetration, and experience—a bold, courageous fellow of imperturbable coolness, who will do anything to ensure the success of his plans ? Yes ; I told him all that, and yet, I give up the game in despair as soon as I meet with a single circumstance that I cannot instantly explain. It is evident that such a prisoner would not resort to old, hackneyed, commonplace expedients. Time, patience, and research are requisite to find a flaw in his defence. With such a man as he is, the more appearances are against my presumptions, and in favour of his narrative, the more certain it is that I am right—or else, logic is no longer logic."

At this thought, Lecoq burst into a hearty laugh. "Still," continued he, "it would perhaps be premature to expose this theory at head-quarters in Gévrol's presence. He would at once present me with a certificate for admission into some lunatic asylum."

The young detective paused. Whilst, absorbed in thought, his legs obeying an instinctive impulse, had brought him to his lodgings. He rang the bell ; the door opened, and he groped his way slowly up to the fourth floor. He had reached his room, and was about to enter, when someone, whom he could not distinguish in the dark, called out : "Is that you, Monsieur Lecoq ?"

"Yes, it's I ?" replied the young man, somewhat surprised ; "but who are you ?"

cident. "Madame," he began, "I wish to speak to the proprietor of this hotel."

"I am the proprietor."

"Oh! very well. I was expecting a mechanic—from Leipsic—to meet me here in Paris. To my great surprise, he has not made his appearance; and I came to inquire if he was stopping here. His name is May."

"May!" repeated the hostess, thoughtfully. "May!"

"He ought to have arrived last Sunday evening."

The woman's face brightened. "Wait a moment," said she. "Was this friend of yours a middle-aged man, of medium size, of very dark complexion—wearing a full beard, and having very bright eyes?"

Lecoq could scarcely conceal his agitation. This was an exact description of the supposed murderer. "Yes," he stammered, "that is a very good portrait of the man."

"Ah, well! he came here on Shrove Sunday, in the afternoon. He asked for a cheap room, and I showed him one on the fifth floor. The office-boy was not here at the time, and he insisted upon taking his trunk up stairs himself. I offered him some refreshment; but he declined to take anything, saying that he was in a great hurry; and he went away after giving me ten francs as security for the rent."

"Where is he now?" inquired the young detective.

"Dear me! that reminds me," replied the woman. "He has never returned, and I have been rather anxious about him. Paris is such a dangerous place for strangers! It is true he spoke French as well as you or I; but what of that? Yesterday evening I gave orders that the commissary of police should be informed of the matter."

"Yesterday—the commissary?"

"Yes. Still, I don't know whether the boy obeyed me. I had forgotten all about it. Allow me to ring for the boy, and ask him."

A bucket of iced water falling upon Lecoq's head, could not have astonished him more, than did this announcement from the proprietress of the Hôtel de Mariembourg. Had the prisoner indeed told the truth? Was it possible? Gévrol and the governor of the prison were right, then, and M. Segmüller and he, Lecoq, were senseless fools, pursuing a phantom. These ideas flashed rapidly through the young detective's brain. But he had no time for reflection. The boy who had been summoned now made his appearance, and proved to be a big, overgrown lad, with a frank chubby face.

"Fritz," asked his mistress, "did you go to the commissary's office?"

"Yes, madame."

"What did he say?"

"He was not in; but I spoke to his secretary, M. Casimir, who said you were not to worry yourself, as the man would no doubt return."

"But he has not returned."

The boy rejoined, with a movement of the shoulders that plainly implied: "How can I help that?"

"You hear, sir," said the hostess, apparently thinking the importunate questioner would now withdraw.

Such, however, was not Lecoq's intention, and he did not even move, though he had need of all his self-possession to retain his English accent. "This is very annoying," said he, "very! I am even more anxious and undecided than I was before, since I am not certain that this is the man I am seeking for."

"Unfortunately, sir, I can tell you nothing more," calmly replied the landlady.

Lecoq reflected for a moment, knitting his brows and biting his lips, as if he were trying to discover some means of solving the mystery. In point of fact, he was seeking for some adroit phrase which might lead this woman to show him the register in which all travellers are compelled to inscribe their full names, profession, and usual residence. At the same time, however, it was necessary that he should not arouse her suspicions.

"But, madame," said he at last, "can't you remember the name this man gave you? Was it May? Try to recollect if that was the name—May—May!"

"Ah! I have so many things to remember. But now I think of it, and the name must be entered in my book which, if it would oblige you, I can show you. It is in the drawer of my writing table. Whatever can I have done with my keys?"

And while the hostess, who seemed to possess about as much intelligence as her starling, was turning the whole office upside down looking for her keys, Lecoq scrutinized her closely. She was about forty years of age, with an abundance of light hair, and a very fair complexion. She was well preserved—that is to say, she was plump and healthy in appearance; her glance was frank and unembarrassed; her voice was clear and musical, and her manners were pleasing, and entirely free from affectation.

"Ah!" she eventually exclaimed, "I have found those wretched keys at last." So saying, she opened her desk, took out the register, laid it on the table, and began turning over the leaves. At last she found the desired page.

"Sunday, February 20th," said she. "Look sir: here on the seventh line—May—no Christian name—foreign artist—coming from Leipsic—with-out papers."

While Lecoq was examining this record with a dazed air, the woman exclaimed: "Ah! now I can explain how it happened that I forgot the man's name, and strange profession—'foreign artist.' I did not make the entry myself."

"Who made it, then?"

"The man himself, while I was finding ten francs to give him as change for the louis he handed me. You can see that the writing is not at all like that of the other entries."

Lecoq had already noted this circumstance, which seemed to furnish an irrefutable argument, in favour of the assertions made by the landlady and the prisoner. "Are you sure," he asked, "that this is the man's handwriting?"

In his anxiety, he had forgot his English accent. The woman noticed this at once for she drew back, and cast a suspicious glance at the pretended foreigner. "I know what I am saying," she said, indignantly. "And now this is enough, isn't it?"

Knowing that he had betrayed himself, and thoroughly ashamed of his lack of coolness, Lecoq renounced his English accent altogether. "Excuse me," he said, "if I ask one more question. Have you this man's trunk in your possession?"

"Certainly."

"You would do me an immense service by showing it to me."

"Show it to you!" exclaimed the landlady, angrily. "What do you take me for? What do you want? and who are you?"

"You shall know in half-an-hour," replied the young detective, realising that further persuasion would be useless.

He hastily left the room, ran to the Place de Roubaix, jumped into a cab, and giving the driver the address of the district commissary of police, promised him a hundred sous over and above the regular fare if he would only make haste. As might have been expected under such circumstances, the poor horse fairly flew over the ground.

Lecoq was fortunate enough to find the commissary at his office. Having given his name, he was immediately ushered into the magistrate's presence and told his story in a few words.

"It is really true that they came to inform me of this man's disappearance," said the commissary. "Casimir told me about it this morning."

"They—came—to inform—you——" faltered Lecoq.

"Yes, yesterday; but I have had so much to occupy my time. Now, my man, "how can I serve you?"

"Come with me, sir; compel them to show us the trunk, and send for a locksmith to open it. Here is the authority—a search warrant given me by the investigating magistrate to use in case of necessity. Let us lose no time. I have a cab at the door."

"We will start at once," said the commissary.

The driver whipped up his horse once more, and they were soon rapidly rolling in the direction of the Rue St. Quentin.

"Now, sir," said the young detective, "permit me to ask if you know this woman who keeps the Hôtel de Mariembourg?"

"Yes, indeed, I know her very well. When I was first appointed to this district, six years ago, I was a bachelor, and for a long while, I took my meals at her table d'hôte, Casimir, my secretary, boards there even now."

"And what kind of a woman is she?"

"Why, upon my word, my young friend, Madame Milner—for such is her name—is a very respectable widow (highly esteemed by her neighbours) and having a very prosperous business. If she remains a widow, it is only from choice, for she is very prepossessing and has plenty of suitors."

"Then you don't think her capable of serving, for the sake of a good round sum, the interests of some wealthy culprit?"

"Have you gone mad?" interrupted the commissary. "What, Madame Milner perjure herself for the sake of money! Haven't I just told you that she is an honest woman, and that she is very well off! Besides, she informed me yesterday that this man was missing, so——"

Lecoq made no reply; the driver was pulling up; they had reached their destination.

On seeing her obstinate questioner re-appear, accompanied by the commissary, Madame Milner seemed to understand everything.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed, "a detective! I might have guessed it? Some crime has been committed; and now my hotel has lost its reputation forever!"

While a messenger was despatched for a locksmith, the commissary endeavoured to re-assure and console her, a task of no little difficulty, and which he was some time in accomplishing.

At last they all went up to the missing man's room, and Lecoq sprang towards the trunk. Ah! there was no denying it. It had, indeed, come from Leipzig; as the labels pasted upon it by the different railroad companies, only too plainly proved. On being opened, it was, moreover, found to contain the various articles mentioned by the prisoner.

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The young detective paused. Whilst, absorbed in thought, his legs obeying an instinctive impulse, had brought him to his lodgings. He rang the bell ; the door opened, and he groped his way slowly up to the fourth floor. He had reached his room, and was about to enter, when someone, whom he could not distinguish in the dark, called out : "Is that you, Monsieur Lecoq ?"

"Yes, it's I ?" replied the young man, somewhat surprised ; "but who are you ?"

"I'm Father Absinthe."

"Oh! indeed! Well, you are welcome! I didn't recognize your voice—will you come in?"

They entered the room, and Lecoq lit a candle. Then the young man could see his colleague, and, good heavens! he found him in a most pitiable condition.

He was as dirty and as bespattered with mud as a lost dog that has been wandering about in the rain and the mire for a week at the very least. His overcoat bore the traces of frequent contact with damp walls; his hat had lost its form entirely. His eyes wore an anxious look, and his moustache drooped despondently. He spoke, moreover, so strangely that one might have supposed his mouth was full of sand.

"Do you bring me bad news?" inquired Lecoq, after a short examination of his companion.

"Yes, bad.

"The people you were following escaped you, then?"

The old man nodded his head affirmatively.

"It is unfortunate—very unfortunate!" said Lecoq. "But it is useless to distress ourselves about it. Don't be so cast down, Father Absinthe. To-morrow, between us, we will repair the damage."

This friendly encouragement only increased the old man's evident embarrassment. He blushed, this veteran, as if he had been a school-girl, and raising his hands towards heaven, he exclaimed: "Ah, you wretch! didn't I tell you so?"

"Why! what is the matter with you?" inquired Lecoq.

Father Absinthe made no reply. Approaching a looking-glass that hung against the wall, he surveyed himself reproachfully and began to heap cruel insults upon the reflection of his features.

"You old good-for-nothing!" he exclaimed. "You vile deserter! have you no shame left? You were entrusted with a mission, were you not? And how have you fulfilled it? You have got drunk, you old wretch, so drunk as to have lost your wits. Ah, you shan't escape punishment this time, for even if M. Lecoq is indulgent, you shan't taste another drop for a week. Yes, you old sot, you shall suffer for this escapade."

"Come, come," said Lecoq, "you can sermonise by and bye. Now tell me your story."

"Ah! I am not proud of it, believe me. However, never mind. No doubt you received the letter in which I told you I was going to follow the young men who seemed to recognise Gustave?"

"Yes, yes—go on!"

"Well, as soon as they entered the café, into which I had followed them, they began drinking, probably to drive away their emotion. After that, they apparently felt hungry. At all events they ordered breakfast. I followed their example. The meal, with coffee and beer afterwards, took up no little time, and indeed a couple of hours had elapsed before they were ready to pay their bill and go. Good! I supposed they would now return home, not at all. They walked down the Rue Dauphin; and I saw them enter another café. Five minutes later I glided in after them; and found them already engaged in a game of billiards."

At this point, Father Absinthe hesitated; it is no easy task to recount one's blunders to the very person who has suffered by them.

"I seated myself at a little table," he eventually resumed, "and asked for a newspaper. I was reading with one eye and watching them with the

other, when a respectable looking man entered, and took a seat beside me. As soon as he had seated himself he asked me to let him have the paper when I had finished with it. I handed it to him, and then we began talking about the weather. At last he proposed a game of brique. I declined, but we afterwards compromised the matter by having a game of piquet. The young men, you understand, were still knocking the balls about. We began by playing for a glass of brandy each. I won. My adversary asked for his revenge, and we played two games more. I still kept on winning. He insisted upon another game, and again I won, and still I drank—and drank again—

“Go on, go on.”

“Ah! here’s the rub. After that I remember nothing—nothing either about the man I had been playing with, or the young men. It seems to me, however, that I recollect falling asleep in the café, and that a long while afterwards a waiter came and woke me and told me to go. Then I must have wandered about along the quays until I came to my senses, and decided to go to your lodgings and wait on the stairs until you returned.”

To Father Absinthe’s great surprise, Lecoq seemed rather thoughtful than angry. “What do you think about this chance acquaintance of yours, papa?” asked the young detective.

“I think he was following me while I was following the others, and that he entered the café with the view of making me drunk.”

“What was he like?”

“Oh, he was a tall, stoutish man, with a broad, red face, and a flat nose; and he was very unpretending and affable in manner.”

“It was he!” exclaimed Lecoq.

“He! Who?”

“Why, the accomplice—the man whose foot-prints we discovered—the pretended drunkard—a devil incarnate, who will get the best of us yet, if we don’t keep our eyes open. Don’t you forget him, papa; and if you ever meet him again—”

But Father Absinthe’s confession was not ended. Like most devotees, he had reserved the worst sin for the last.

“But that’s not all,” he resumed; “and as its best to make a clean breast of it, I will tell you that it seems to me this traitor talked about the affair at the Poivrière, and that I told him all we had discovered, and all we intended to do.”

Lecoq made such a threatening gesture that the old tippler drew back in consternation. “You wretched man!” exclaimed the young detective, “to betray our plans to the enemy!”

But his calmness soon returned. If at first sight the evil seemed to be beyond remedy, on further thought, it had a good side after all. It sufficed to dispel all the doubts that had assailed Lecoq’s mind after his visit to the Hôtel de Mariembourg.

“However,” quoth our hero, “this is not the time for deliberation. I am overcome with fatigue; take a mattress from the bed for yourself, my friend, and let us get a little sleep.”

Lecoq was a man of considerable forethought. Hence, before going to bed he took good care to wind up his alarm so that it might wake him at six o’clock. “With that to warn us,” he remarked to his companion, as he blew out the candle, “there need be no fear of our missing the coach.”

He had not, however, made allowance for his own extreme weariness or for the soporific effect of the alcoholic fumes with which his comrade’s

breath was redolent. When six o'clock struck at the church of St. Eustache, the young detective's alarm resounded faithfully enough, with a loud and protracted whirr. Shrill and sonorous as was the sound, it failed however to break the heavy sleep of the two detectives. They would indeed, in all probability, have continued slumbering for several hours longer, if at half-past seven a sturdy fist had not begun to rap loudly at the door. With one bound, Lecoq was out of bed, amazed at seeing the bright sunlight, and furious at the futility of his precautions.

"Come in!" he cried to his early visitor. He had no enemies to fear, and could, without danger, sleep with his door unlocked.

In response to his call, Father Papillon's shrewd face peered into the room.

"Ah! it is my worthy coachman!" exclaimed Lecoq. "Is there anything new?"

"Excuse me, but it's the old affair that brings me here," replied our eccentric friend the cabman. "You know—the thirty francs those wretched women paid me. Really, I shan't sleep in peace till you have worked off the amount by using my vehicle. Our drive yesterday lasted two hours and a half which, according to the regular fare, would be worth a hundred sous; so you see I've still more than twelve hours at your disposal."

"That is all nonsense, my friend!"

"Possibly, but I am responsible for it, and if you won't use my cab, I've sworn to spend those twelve hours waiting outside your door. So now make up your mind." He gazed at Lecoq beseechingly, and it was evident that a refusal would wound him keenly.

"Very well," replied Lecoq, "I will take you for the morning, only I ought to warn you that we are starting on a long journey."

"Oh, Cocotte's legs may be relied upon."

"My companion and myself have business in your own neighbourhood. It is absolutely necessary for us to find the Widow Chupin's daughter-in-law; and I hope we shall be able to obtain her address from the police commissary of the district where the Poivrière is situated."

"Very well, we will go wherever you wish; I am at your orders."

A few moments later they were on their way.

Papillon's features wore an air of self-satisfied pride, as sitting erect on his box, he cracked his whip, and encouraged the nimble Cocotte. The vehicle could not have got over the ground more rapidly if its driver had been promised a hundred sous gratuity.

Father Absinthe alone was sad. He had been forgiven by Lecoq, but he could not forget that he, an old police-agent, had been duped as easily as if he had been some ignorant provincial. The thought was humiliating and then in addition he had been fool enough to reveal the secret plans of the prosecution! He knew but too well that this act of folly had doubled the difficulties of Lecoq's task.

The long drive in Father Papillon's cab was not a fruitless one. The secretary of the commissary of police for the thirteenth arrondissement informed Lecoq that Polyte Chupin's wife lived with her child, in the suburbs, in the Rue de la Butte-aux-Cailles. He could not indicate the precise number, but he described the house, and gave them some information concerning its occupants.

The Widow Chupin's daughter-in-law, a native of Auvergne, had been bitterly punished for preferring a rakish Parisian ragamuffin to one of the grimy charcoal burners of the Puy de Dôme. She was hardly more than

twelve years of age when she first came to Paris and obtained employment in a large factory. After ten years' privation and constant toil, she had managed to amass, sou by sou, the sum of three thousand francs. Then her evil genius threw Polyte Chupin across her path. She fell in love with this dissipated, selfish rascal ; and he married her for the sake of her little hoard.

As long as the money lasted, that is, for some three or four months, matters went on pleasantly enough. But as soon as the last franc had been spent, Polyte left his wife, and complacently resumed his former life of idleness, thieving, and debauchery. When at times he returned home, it was merely with the view of robbing his wife of what little money she might have saved in the meanwhile ; and periodically, she uncomplainingly allowed him to despoil her of the last penny of her earnings.

Horrible to relate, this unworthy rascal even tried to trade on her good looks. Here, however, he met with a strenuous resistance—a resistance which excited not merely his own ire, but also the hatred of the villain's mother—that old hag the Widow Chupin. The result was that Polyte's wife was subjected to such incessant cruelty and persecution that one night she was forced to fly with only the rags that covered her. The Chupins—mother and son—believed, perhaps, that starvation would effect what their horrible threats, and insidious counsel had failed to accomplish. Their shameful expectations were not, however, gratified.

In mentioning these facts to Lecoq, the commissary's secretary added that they had become widely known, and that the unfortunate creature's force of character had won for her general respect. Among those she frequented, moreover, she was known by the nickname of "Toinon the Virtuous"—a rather vulgar, but, at all events, sincere tribute to her worth.

Grateful for this information, Lecoq returned to the cab. The Rue de la Butte-aux-Cailles, whither Papillon was now directed to drive, proved to be very unlike the Boulevard Malesherbes, and one brief glance sufficed to show that opulence had not here fixed its abode. Luck seemed for the moment to have turned in Lecoq's favour. At all events, when he and Father Absinthe alighted at the corner of the street, it so happened that the very first person the young detective questioned concerning the virtuous Toinon was well acquainted with her whereabouts. The house in which she resided was pointed out, and Lecoq was instructed to go upstairs to the top floor, and knock at the door in front of him. With such precise directions the two detectives speedily reached Madame Polyte Chupin's abode.

This proved to be a cold and gloomy attic of medium size, windowless, but provided with a small skylight. A straw pallet, a broken table, two chairs, and a few plain kitchen utensils constituted the sole appointments of this miserable garret. But in spite of the occupant's evident poverty, everything was neat and clean, and to use a forcible expression that fell from Father Absinthe, one could have eaten off the floor.

The two detectives entered, and found a woman busily engaged in making a heavy linen sack. She was seated in the centre of the room, directly under the skylight, so that the sun's rays might fall upon her work. At the sight of two strangers, she half rose from her chair, surprised, and perhaps a little frightened ; but when Lecoq had explained that they desired a few moments' conversation with her, she gave up her own seat, and drawing the second chair from a corner, invited both detectives to sit down. Lecoq complied, but Father Absinthe declared that he preferred to remain standing.

With a single glance, Lecoq took an inventory of the humble abode, and,

so to speak, appraised the woman. She was short, stout, and of commonplace appearance. Her forehead was extremely low, being crowned by a forest of coarse, black hair ; while the expression of her large, black eyes, set very close together, recalled the look of patient resignation, one so often detects in ill-treated and neglected animals. Possibly, in former days, she might have possessed that fleeting attraction called the *beauté du diable* ; but now she looked almost as old as her wretched mother-in-law. Sorrow and privation, excessive toil and ill-treatment, had imparted to her face a livid hue, reddening her eyes, and stamping deep furrows round about her temples. Still, there was an attribute of native honesty about her which even the foul atmosphere in which she had been compelled to live had not sufficed to taint.

Her little boy furnished a striking contrast. He was pale and puny ; his eyes gleamed with a phosphorescent brilliancy ; and his hair was of a faded flaxen tint. One little circumstance attracted both detectives' attention. If the mother was attired in an old, thin, faded calico dress, the child was warmly clad in stout woollen material.

"Madame, you have doubtless heard of a dreadful crime, committed in your mother-in-law's establishment," began Lecoq in a soft voice.

"Alas ! yes sir," replied Toinon the Virtuous, quickly adding : "But my husband could not have been implicated in it, since he is in prison."

Did not this objection, forestalling as it were suspicion, betray the most horrible apprehensions ?

"Yes, I am aware of that," replied Lecoq. "Polyte was arrested a fortnight ago——"

"Yes, and very unjustly, sir," replied the neglected wife. "He was led astray by his companions, wicked, desperate men. He is so weak when he has taken a glass of wine, that they can do whatever they like with him. If he were only left to himself, he would not harm a child. You have only to look at him——"

As she spoke, the virtuous Toinon turned her red and swollen eyes to a miserable photograph hanging against the wall. This blotchy smudge portrayed an exceedingly ugly, dissipated-looking young man, afflicted with a terrible squint, and whose repulsive mouth, was partially concealed by a faint moustache. This rake of the *barrières* was Polyte Chupin. And yet despite his unprepossessing aspect there was no mistaking the fact that this unfortunate woman loved him—had always loved him ; besides, he was her husband.

A moment's silence followed her indication of the portrait—an act which clearly revealed how deeply she worshipped her persecutor ; and during this pause the attic door slowly and softly opened. Not of itself, however, for suddenly a man's head peered in. The intruder, whoever he was, instantly withdrew, uttering as he did so a low exclamation. The door was swiftly closed again ; the key—which had been left on the outside—grated in the lock, and the occupants of the garret could hear hurried steps descending the stairs.

Lecoq was sitting with his back to the door, and could not, therefore, see the intruder's face. Quickly as he had turned, he had failed to see who it was : and yet he was far from being surprised at the incident. Intuition explained its meaning.

"That must have been the accomplice !" he cried.

Thanks to his position, Father Absinthe had seen the man's face. "Yes," said he, "yes, it was the same man who made me drink with him yesterday."

With a bound, both detectives threw themselves against the door, exhausting their strength in vain attempts to open it. It resisted all their efforts, for it was of solid oak, having been purchased by the landlord from some public building in process of demolition, and it was, moreover, furnished with a strong and massive fastening.

"Help us!" cried Father Absinthe to the woman, who stood petrified with astonishment; "give us a bar, a piece of iron, a nail—anything!"

The younger man was making frantic efforts to push back the bolt, or to force the lock from the wood. He was wild with rage. At last, having succeeded in forcing the door open, they dashed out in pursuit of their mysterious adversary. On reaching the street, they eagerly questioned the bystanders. Having described the man as best they could, they found two persons who had seen him enter the house of Toinon the Virtuous, and a third who had seen him as he left. Some children who were playing in the middle of the street added that he had run off in the direction of the Rue du Moulin-des-Prés as fast as his legs could carry him. It was in this street, near the corner of the Rue de la Butte-aux-Cailles, that Lecoq had left old Papillon waiting with the cab.

"Let us hasten there!" proposed Father Absinthe; "perhaps Papillon can give us some information."

But Lecoq shook his head despondingly. He would go no further, "It would be of no use," he said. "He had sufficient presence of mind to turn the key in the lock, and that saved him. He is at least ten minutes in advance of us, and we should never overtake him."

Father Absinthe could not restrain his anger. He looked upon this mysterious accomplice who had so cruelly duped him as a personal enemy, and he would willingly have given a month's pay to be able to lay his hand on his shoulder. Lecoq was quite as angry as his subordinate, and his vanity was likewise wounded; he felt, however, that coolness and deliberation were necessary.

"Yes," said he, thoughtfully, "he's a shrewd and daring fellow—a perfect demon. He doesn't remain idle. If we are working, he's at work too. No matter what side I turn, I find him on the defensive. He foiled you, papa, in your effort to obtain a clue concerning Gustave's identity; and he made me appear a fool in arranging that little comedy at the Hôtel de Mariembourg. His diligence has been wonderful. He has hitherto been in advance of us everywhere, and this fact explains the failures that have attended all my efforts. Here we arrived before him. But if he came here, it was because he scented danger. Hence, we may hope. Now let us get back and question Polyte's wife."

Alas! poor Toinon the Virtuous, did not understand the affair at all. She had remained upstairs, holding her child by the hand, and leaning over the baluster; her mind in great perplexity, and her eyes and ears on the alert. As soon as she perceived the two detectives coming up the stairs again, she hastened down to meet them. "In the name of heaven, what does this all mean?" she asked. "Whatever has happened?"

But Lecoq was not the man to tell his business on a landing, with inquisitive ears all around him, and before he answered Toinon he made her go up into her own garret, and securely close the door.

"We started in pursuit of a man who is implicated in the murders at the Poivrière," he said; "one who came here hoping to find you alone, who was frightened at seeing us."

"A murderer!" faltered Toinon, with clasped hands. "What could he want of me?"

"Who knows? It is very probable that he is one of your husband's friends."

"Oh! sir."

"Why, did you not tell me just now that Polyte had some very undesirable acquaintances? But don't be alarmed; this does not compromise him in the least. Besides, you can very easily clear him of all suspicion."

"How? In what way? Oh, tell me at once."

"Merely by answering me frankly, and by assisting me to find the guilty party. Now, among all your husband's friends, don't you know any who might be capable of such a deed? Give me the names of his acquaintances."

The poor woman's hesitation was evident; undoubtedly she had been present at many sinister cabals, and had been threatened with terrible punishment if she dared to disclose the plans formed by Polyte or his associates.

"You have nothing to fear," said Lecoq, encouragingly, "and, I promise you, no one shall ever know that you have told me a word. Very probably you can tell me nothing more than I know already. I have heard a great deal about your former life, and the brutality with which Polyte and his mother have treated you."

"My husband has never treated me brutally," said the young woman, indignantly; "besides, that matter would only concern myself."

"And your mother-in-law?"

"She is, perhaps, a trifle quick-tempered; but in reality, she has a good heart."

"Then, if you were so happy at the widow Chupin's house, why did you fly from it?"

Toinon the Virtuous turned scarlet to the very roots of her hair. "I left for other reasons," she replied. "There were always a great many drunken men about the house; and, sometimes, when I was alone, some of them tried to carry their pleasantry too far. You may say that I have a solid fist of my own, and that I am quite capable of protecting myself. That's true. But while I was away one day, some fellows were wicked enough to make this child drink to such an excess, that when I came home I found him as stiff and cold as if he were dead. It was necessary to fetch a doctor or else——"

She suddenly paused; her eyes dilated. From red she turned livid, and in a hoarse, unnatural voice, she cried: "Toto! wretched child!"

Lecoq looked behind him, and shuddered. He understood everything. This child—not yet five years old—had stolen up behind him, and ferreting in the pockets of his over-coat, had rifled them of their contents.

"Ah, well—yes?" exclaimed the unfortunate mother, bursting into tears. "That's how it was. Directly the child was out of my sight, they used to take him into town. They took him into the crowded streets, and taught him to pick people's pockets, and bring them everything he could lay his hands on. If the child was detected they were angry with him and beat him; and if he succeeded they gave him a sou to buy some sweets, and kept what he had taken."

The luckless Toinon hid her face in her hands, and sobbed in an almost unintelligible voice: "Ah, I did not wish my little one to be a thief."

But what this poor creature did not tell was that the man who had led the child out into the streets, to teach him to steal, was his own father, and her husband—the ruffian, Polyte Chupin. The two detectives plainly understood, however, that such was the case, and the father's crime was so horrible, and the woman's grief so great, that, familiar as they were with all the phases of crime, their very hearts were touched. Lecoq's main thought, however, was to shorten this painful scene. The poor mother's emotion was a sufficient guarantee of her sincerity.

"Listen," said he, with affected harshness: "Two questions only, and then I will leave you. Was there a man named Gustave among the frequenters of the Poivrière?"

"No, sir, I'm quite sure there wasn't."

"Very well. But Lacheneur—you must know Lacheneur!"

"Yes, sir; I know him."

The young police-agent could not repress an exclamation of delight. "At last," thought he, "I have a clue that may lead me to the truth. What kind of man is he?" he asked with intense anxiety.

"Oh! he is not at all like the other men who come to drink at my mother-in-law's shop. I have only seen him once; but I remember him perfectly. It was on a Sunday. He was in a cab. He stopped at the corner of the waste ground and spoke to Polyte. When he went away, my husband said to me: 'Do you see that old man there? he will make all our fortunes.' I thought him a very respectable-looking gentleman——"

"That's enough," interrupted Lecoq. "Now it is necessary for you to tell the investigating magistrate all you know about him. I have a cab downstairs. Take your child with you, if you like; but make haste; come, come quickly!"

XVI.

M. SEGMULLER was one of those magistrates whose profession is their only love, and who devote to its duties all the energy, intelligence and sagacity they possess. As an investigator, he displayed, in his constant searches after truth, the same tenacity and zeal that distinguishes a conscientious physician struggling against some unknown disease: the same enthusiasm that is shown by the artist, enamoured of the beautiful, who seeks to realise the ideal of art. Hence, it is easy to understand how greatly this mysterious case attracted and interested him. The magnitude of the crime, the peculiar circumstances attending it, the mystery that enshrouded the identity of both the victims and the murderer, the strange attitude the latter had assumed, everything combined to make a profound impression on his mind. Even the romantic element was not lacking in this strange case; being represented by the two women who had disappeared.

The extreme uncertainty of the result was another attraction for M. Segmuller's investigating mind. Given the magnitude of the difficulties that were to be overcome, he rightly considered that if his efforts proved successful, he would have achieved a really wonderful victory. And, assisted by such a man as Lecoq, who had a positive genius for his calling, and in whom he recognised a most valuable auxiliary, he really felt confident of ultimate success.

Even on returning home after the fatiguing labours of the day he did not think of freeing himself from the burden of responsibility in relation to the business he had on hand, or of driving away care until the morrow.

He dined in haste, and as soon as he had swallowed his coffee began to study the case with renewed ardour. He had brought from his office a copy of the prisoner's narrative, which he attentively perused, not once or twice, but several times, seeking for some weak point that might be attacked with a probability of success. He analysed every answer, and weighed one expression after another, striving as he did so, to find some flaw through which he might slip a question calculated to shatter the structure of defence. He worked thus, far into the night, and yet he was on his legs again at an early hour in the morning. By eight o'clock he was not merely dressed and shaved, he had not merely taken his matutinal chocolate and arranged his papers, but he was actually on his way to the Palais de Justice. He had quite forgotten that his own impatience was not shared by others.

In point of fact, the Palais de Justice was scarcely awake when he arrived there. The doors had barely opened. The attendants were busy sweeping and dusting; or changing their ordinary garments for their official costumes. Some of them standing at the windows of the long dressing-room were shaking and brushing the judges' and advocates' gowns; while in the great hall several clerks stood in a group, chaffing each other whilst waiting for the arrival of the head registrar and the opening of the investigation offices.

M. Segmuller thought that he had better begin by consulting the public prosecutor, but he discovered that this functionary had not yet arrived. Angry and impatient, he proceeded to his own office; and with his eyes fixed on the clock, growled at the slowness of the minute hand. Just after nine o'clock, Goguet, the smiling clerk, put in an appearance and speedily learnt the kind of humour his master was in.

"Ah, you've come at last," gruffly ejaculated M. Segmuller, momentarily oblivious of the fact that he himself scarcely ever arrived before ten, and that a quarter-past nine was certainly early for his clerk.

Goguet's curiosity had indeed prompted him to hurry to the Palais; still, although well aware that he did not deserve a reprimand, he endeavoured to mumble an excuse—an excuse cut short by M. Segmuller in such unusually harsh tones that for once in a way, Goguet's habitual smile faded from his face.

"It's evident," thought he, "that the wind's blowing from a bad quarter this morning," with which reflection he philosophically put on his black sleeves and going to his table pretended to be absorbed in the task of mending his pens and preparing his paper.

In the meanwhile, M. Segmuller, who was usually calmness personified, and dignity *par excellence*, paced restlessly to and fro. At times he would sit down and then suddenly spring to his feet again gesticulating impatiently as he did so. Indeed, he seemed unable to remain quiet for a moment.

"The prosecution is evidently making no headway," thought the clerk. "May's prospects are encouraging." Owing to the magistrate's harsh reception the idea delighted him; and, indeed, letting his rancour have the upper hand, Goguet actually offered up a mental prayer that the prisoner might get the better of the fight.

From half-past nine till ten o'clock M. Segmuller rang for his messenger at least five times, and each time he asked him the same questions. "Are you sure that M. Lecoq has not been here this morning? Inquire! If he has not been here he must certainly have sent someone, or else have written to me."

Each time the astonished door-keeper replied : "No one has been here, and there is no letter for you."

Five identical negative answers to the same inquiries only increased the magistrate's wrath and impatience. "It is inconceivable!" he exclaimed. "Here I am upon coals of fire, and that man dares to keep me waiting. Where can he be?"

At last he ordered a messenger to go and see if he could not find Lecoq somewhere in the neighbourhood ; perhaps in some restaurant or café. "At all events, he must be found and brought back immediately," said he.

When the man had started, M. Segmuller began to recover his composure. "We must not lose valuable time," he said to his clerk. "I was to examine the Widow Chupin's son. I had better do so now. Go and tell them to bring him to me. Lecoq left the order at the prison."

In less than a quarter of an hour Polyte entered the room. From head to foot, from his lofty silk cap to his gaudy-coloured carpet slippers, he was indeed the original of the portrait upon which poor Toinon the Virtuous had lavished such loving glances. And yet the photograph was flattering. The lens had failed to convey the expression of low cunning that distinguished the man's features, the impudence of his leering smile, and the mingled cowardice and ferocity of his eyes, which never looked another person in the face. Nor could the portrait depict the unwholesome, livid pallor of his skin, the restless blinking of his eyelids, and the constant movement of his thin lips as he drew them tightly over his short, sharp teeth. There was no mistaking his nature: one glance and he was estimated at his worth.

When he had answered the preliminary questions, telling the magistrate that he was thirty years of age, and that he had been born in Paris, he assumed a pretentious attitude and waited to see what else was coming.

But before proceeding with the real matter in hand, M. Segmuller wished to relieve the complacent scoundrel of some of his insulting assurance. Accordingly, he reminded Polyte, in forcible terms, that his sentence in the affair in which he was implicated would depend very much upon his behaviour and answers during the present examination.

Polyte listened with a nonchalant and even ironical air. In fact, this indirect threat scarcely touched him. Having previously made inquiries he had ascertained that he could not be condemned to more than six months' imprisonment for the offence for which he had been arrested ; and what did a month more or less matter to him ?

The magistrate who read this thought in Polyte's eyes, cut his preamble short. "Justice," said he, "now requires some information from you concerning the frequenters of your mother's establishment."

"There are a great many of them, sir," answered Polyte in a harsh voice.

"Do you know one of them named Gustave?"

"No, sir."

To insist would probably awaken suspicion in Polyte's mind ; accordingly, M. Segmuller continued : "You must, however, remember Lacheneur?"

"Lacheneur? No, this is the first time I've heard that name."

"Take care. The police have means of finding out a great many things."

The scapegrace did not flinch. "I am telling the truth sir," he retorted.

"What interest could I possibly have in deceiving you?"

Scarcely had he finished speaking than the door suddenly opened and Toinon the Virtuous entered the room, carrying her child in her arms. On

perceiving her husband, she uttered a joyful exclamation, and sprang towards him. But Polyte, stepping back, gave her such a threatening glance that she remained rooted to the spot.

"It must be an enemy who pretends that I know anyone named Lache-neur?" cried the *barrière* bully. "I should like to kill the person who uttered such a falsehood. Yes, kill him; I will never forgive it."

The messenger whom M. Segmuller had instructed to go in search of Lecoq was not at all displeased with the errand; for it enabled him to leave his post and take a pleasant little stroll through the neighbourhood. He first of all proceeded to the *Préfecture* of Police, going the longest way round as a matter of course, but, on reaching his destination, he could find no one who had seen the young detective.

Accordingly, M. Segmuller's envoy retraced his steps, and leisurely sauntered through the restaurants, *cafés*, and wine-shops installed in the vicinity of the *Palais de Justice*, and dependent on the customers it brought them. Being of a conscientious turn of mind he entered each establishment in succession and meeting now and again various acquaintances, he felt compelled to proffer and accept numerous glasses of the favourite morning beverage—white wine. Turn which way he would, however, loiter as long as he might, there were still no signs of Lecoq. He was returning in haste, a trifle uneasy on account of the length of his absence, when he perceived a cab pull up in front of the *Palais* gateway. A second glance, and oh, great good fortune, he saw Lecoq, Father Absinthe, and the virtuous Toinon alight from this very vehicle. His peace of mind at once returned; and it was in a very important, and somewhat husky tone that he delivered the order for Lecoq to follow him without a minute's delay. "M. Segmuller has asked for you a number of times," said he. "He has been extremely impatient, and he is in a very bad humour; so you may expect to have your head snapped off in the most expeditious manner."

Lecoq smiled as he went up the stairs. Was he not bringing with him the most potent of justifications? He thought of the agreeable surprise he had in store for the magistrate, and fancied he could picture the sudden brightening of that functionary's gloomy face.

And yet, fate so willed it that the door-keeper's message and his urgent appeal that Lecoq should not loiter on the way, produced the most unfortunate results. Believing that M. Segmuller was anxiously waiting for him, Lecoq saw nothing wrong in opening the door of the magistrate's room without previously knocking; and being anxious to justify his absence, he yielded, moreover, to the impulse that led him to push forward the poor woman whose testimony might prove so decisive. When he saw, however, that the magistrate was not alone, and when he recognized, Polyte Chupin—the original of the photograph—in the man M. Segmuller was examining, his stupefaction became intense. He instantly perceived his mistake and understood its consequences.

There was only one thing to be done: He must prevent any exchange of words between the two. Accordingly, springing towards Toinon and seizing her roughly by the arm, he ordered her to leave the room at once. But the poor creature was quite overcome, and trembled like a leaf. Her eyes were fixed upon her unworthy husband, and the happiness she felt at seeing him again shone plainly in her anxious gaze. Just for one second; and then she caught his withering glance and heard his words of menace. Terror-stricken she staggered back and then Lecoq seized her round the waist and lifting her with his strong arms carried her out into the passage. The whole scene

had been so brief, that M. Segmuller was still forming the order for Toinon to be removed from the room, when he found the door closed again, and himself and Goguet alone with Polyte.

"Ah, ah!" thought the smiling clerk, in a flutter of delight, "this is something new." But as these little diversions never made him forget his duties, he leant towards the magistrate and asked. "Shall I take down the last words the witness uttered?"

"Certainly," replied M. Segmuller, "and word for word, if you please."

He paused; the door opened again, this time to admit the magistrate's messenger, who timidly, and with a rather guilty air, handed his master a note, and then withdrew. This note, scribbled in pencil by Lecoq on a leaf torn from his memorandum book, gave the magistrate the name of the woman who had just entered his room, and recapitulated briefly but clearly the information obtained in the Rue de la Butte-aux-Cailles.

"That young fellow thinks of everything!" murmured M. Segmuller. The meaning of the scene that had just occurred, was now explained to him. He understood everything.

He bitterly regretted this unfortunate meeting; at the same time, casting the blame on his own impatience, and lack of caution, which, as soon as the messenger had started in search of Lecoq, had induced him to summon Polyte Chupin. Although he could not conceal from himself the enormous influence this seemingly trivial incident might have, still he would not allow himself to be cast down, but prepared to resume his examination of Polyte Chupin in hopes of yet obtaining the information he desired.

"Let us proceed," he said to Polyte, who had not moved since his wife had been taken from the room, being to all appearance sublimely indifferent to everything passing around him. To the magistrate's proposal he carelessly nodded assent.

"Was that your wife who came in just now?" asked M. Segmuller.

"Yes."

"She wished to embrace you, and you repulsed her."

"I didn't repulse her."

"You kept her at a distance at all events. If you had a spark of affection in your nature, you would at least, have looked at your child, which she held out to you. Why did you behave in that manner?"

"It wasn't the time for sentiment."

"You are not telling the truth. You simply desired to attract her attention to influence her evidence."

"I—I influence her evidence! I don't understand you."

"But for that supposition, your words would have been meaningless?"

"What words?"

The magistrate turned to his clerk: "Goguet," said he, "read the last remark you took down."

In a monotonous voice, the smiling clerk repeated: "I should like to kill the person who dared to say that I knew Lacheneur."

"Well then!" insisted M. Segmuller, "what did you mean by that?"

"It's very easy to understand, sir."

M. Segmuller rose. "Don't prevaricate any longer," he said. "You certainly ordered your wife not to say anything about Lacheneur. That's evident, why did you do so? What are you afraid of her telling us? Do you suppose the police are ignorant of your acquaintance with Lacheneur—of your conversation with him when he came in a cab to the corner of the waste-ground near your mother's wine-shop; and of the hopes of fortune

you based upon his promises? Be guided by me; confess everything, while there is yet time; and abandon the present course which may lead you into serious danger. One may be an accomplice in more ways than one."

As these words fell on Polyte's ear, it was evident his impudence and indifference had received a severe shock. He seemed confounded, and hung his head as if thoroughly abashed. Still, he preserved an obstinate silence; and the magistrate finding that this last thrust had failed to produce any effect, gave up the fight in despair. He rang the bell, and ordered the guard to conduct the witness back to prison, and to take every precaution to prevent him seeing his wife again.

When Polyte had departed, Lecoq re-entered the room. "Ah, sir," said he, sardonically, "to think that I didn't draw out of this woman everything she knew, when I might have done so easily. But I thought you would be waiting for me, and made haste to bring her here. I thought I was acting for the best—"

"Never mind, the misfortune can be repaired."

"No, sir, no. Since she has seen her husband, it is quite impossible to get her to speak. She loves that rascal intensely, and he has a wonderful influence over her. You heard what he said. He threatened her with death if she breathed a word about Lacheneur, and she is so terrified that there is no hope of making her speak."

Lecoq's apprehension was based on fact, as M. Segmuller himself perceived, the instant Toinon the Virtuous, again set foot in his office. The poor creature seemed nearly heart-broken, and it was evident she would have given her life to retract the words that had escaped her when first questioned by Lecoq. Polyte's threat had aroused the most sinister apprehensions in her mind. Not understanding his connection with the affair, she asked herself if her testimony might not prove his death-warrant. Accordingly, she answered all M. Segmuller's questions with "no" or "I don't know;" and retracted everything she had previously stated to Lecoq. She swore that she had been misunderstood, that her words had been misconstrued; and vowed on her mother's memory, that she had never heard the name of Lacheneur before. At last, she burst into wild, despairing sobs, pressed her frightened child against her breast.

What could be done to overcome this foolish obstinacy, as blind and unreasoning as a brute's? M. Segmuller hesitated. "You may retire, my good woman," said he kindly, after a moment's pause "but remember that your strange silence injures your husband far more than anything you could say."

She left the room—or rather she rushed wildly from it as though only too eager to escape—and the magistrate and the detective exchanged glances of dismay and consternation.

"I said so before," thought Goguët "the prisoner knows what he's about. I would be willing to bet a hundred to one in his favour."

A French investigating magistrate is possessed of almost unlimited powers. No one can hamper him, no one can give him orders. The entire police force is at his disposal. One word from him and twenty agents, or a hundred if need be, search Paris, ransack France, or explore Europe. If there be anyone whom he believes able to throw light upon an obscure point, he simply sends an order to that person to appear before him, and the man must come even if he lives a hundred leagues away. Such is the magistrate, such are his powers. On the other hand, the prisoner charged with a crime, but as yet unconvicted, is confined, unless his offence be of a

trivial description—in what is called a “secret cell.” He is, so to say, cut off from the number of the living. He knows nothing of what may be going on in the world outside. He cannot tell what witnesses may have been called, or what they may have said—and in his uncertainty he asks himself again and again how far the prosecution has been able to establish the charges against him. Such is the prisoner’s position, and yet despite the fact that the two adversaries are so unequally armed, the man in the secret cell not unfrequently wins the victory. If he is sure that he has left behind him no proof of his having committed the crime; if he has no guilty antecedents to be afraid of, he can—impregnable in a defence of absolute denial—brave all the attacks of justice.

Such was, at this moment, the situation of May, the mysterious murderer; as both M. Segmuller and Lecoq were forced to admit, with mingled grief and anger. They had hoped to arrive at a solution of the problem by examining Polyte Chupin and his wife, and they had been disappointed; for the prisoner’s identity remained as problematical as ever.

“And yet,” exclaimed the magistrate impatiently, “these people know something about this matter, and if they would only speak—”

“But they won’t.”

“What motive is it that keeps them silent? This is what we must discover. Who will tell us the price that has been promised Polyte Chupin for his silence? What recompense can he count upon? It must be a great one for he is braving real danger!”

Lecoq did not immediately reply to the magistrate’s successive queries, but it was easy to see from his knit brows that his mind was hard at work. “You ask me, sir,” he eventually remarked, “*what* reward has been promised Chupin. I ask on my part *who* can have promised him this reward?”

“Who has promised it? Why, plainly the accomplice who has beaten us on every point.”

“Yes,” rejoined Lecoq, “I suppose it must have been him. It certainly looks like his handiwork—now, what artifice can he have used? We know how he managed to have an interview with the Widow Chupin, but how has he succeeded in getting at Polyte, who is in prison, closely watched?”

The young detective’s insinuation, vague as it was, did not escape M. Segmuller. “What do you mean?” asked the latter, with an air of mingled surprise and indignation. “You can’t suppose that one of the keepers has been bribed?”

Lecoq shook his head, in a somewhat equivocal manner. “I mean nothing,” he replied; “I don’t suspect any one? All I want is information. Has Chupin been forewarned or not?”

“Yes, of course he has.”

“Then, if that point is admitted it can only be explained in two ways. Either there are informers in the prison, or else Chupin has been allowed to see some visitor.”

These suppositions evidently worried M. Segmuller; who for a moment seemed to hesitate between the two opinions; then, suddenly making up his mind, he rose from his chair, took up his hat, and said: “This matter, must be cleared up. Come with me, Monsieur Lecoq.”

A couple of minutes later, the magistrate and the detective had reached the Dépôt, which is connected with the Palais de Justice by a narrow passage, especially reserved for official use. The prisoners’ morning rations

had just been served to them, and the governor was walking up and down the court-yard, in the company of Inspector Gérol. As soon as he perceived M. Segmuller he hastened towards him and asked if he had not come about the prisoner May.

As the magistrate nodded assent, the governor at once added, "Well I was only just now telling Inspector Gérol that I was very well satisfied with May's behaviour. It has not only been quite unnecessary to place him in the strait-waistcoat again, but his mood seems to have changed entirely. He eats with a good appetite; he is as gay as a lark, and he constantly laughs and jests with his keeper."

Gérol had pricked up his ears when he heard himself named by the governor, and considering this mention to be a sufficient introduction, he thought there would be no impropriety in his listening to the conversation. Accordingly, he approached the others, and noted with some satisfaction the troubled glances which Lecoq and the magistrate exchanged.

M. Segmuller was plainly perplexed. May's gay manner to which the governor of the Dépôt alluded might perhaps have been assumed for the purpose of sustaining his character as a jester and buffoon, it might be due to a certainty of defeating the judicial enquiry; or, who knows? the prisoner had perhaps received some favourable news from outside.

With Lecoq's last words still ringing in his ears, it is no wonder that the magistrate should have dwelt on this last supposition. "Are you quite sure," he asked, "that no communication from outside can reach the inmates of the secret cells?"

The governor of the Dépôt was cut to the quick, by M. Segmuller's implied doubt. What! were his subordinates suspected? Was his own professional honesty impugned? He could not help lifting his hands to heaven in mute protest against such an unjust charge.

"Am I sure?" he exclaimed. "Then you can never have visited the secret cells. You have no idea, then, of their situation; you are unacquainted with the triple bolts, that secure the doors; the grating that shuts out the sunlight, to say nothing of the guard who walks beneath the windows day and night. Why, a bird couldn't even reach the prisoners in those cells."

Such a description was bound to re-assure the most sceptical mind, and M. Segmuller breathed again: "Now that I am easy on that score," said he, "I should like some information about another prisoner—a fellow named Chupin, who isn't in the secret cells. I want to know if any visitor came for him yesterday?"

"I must speak to the registrar," replied the governor, "before I can answer you with certainty. Wait a moment though, here comes a man who can perhaps tell us. He is usually on guard at the entrance. Here, Ferraud, this way!"

The man to whom the governor called hastened to obey the summons.

"Do you know whether any one asked to see the prisoner Chupin yesterday?"

"Yes, sir, I went to fetch Chupin to the parlour myself."

"And who was his visitor?" eagerly asked Lecoq, "wasn't he a tall man; very red in the face—"

"Excuse me, sir, the visitor was a lady—his aunt, at least so Chupin told me."

Neither M. Segmuller nor Lecoq could restrain an exclamation of surprise. "What was she like?" they both asked at the same time.

"She was short," replied the attendant, "with a very fair complexion and light hair: she seemed to be a very respectable woman."

"It must have been one of the female fugitives who escaped from the Widow Chupin's hovel," exclaimed Lecoq.

Gévrol, hitherto an attentive listener, burst into a loud laugh. "Still that Russian princess," said he.

Neither the magistrate nor the young detective relished this unreasonable jest. "You forget yourself, sir," said M. Segmuller severely. "You forget that the sneers you address to your comrade also apply to me!"

The General saw that he had gone too far; and while glancing hatefully at Lecoq, he mumbled an apology to the magistrate. The latter did not apparently hear him, for, bowing to the governor, he motioned Lecoq to follow him away.

"Run to the Préfecture of Police," he said as soon as they were out of hearing, "and ascertain how and under what pretext this woman obtained permission to see Polyte Chupin."

XVII.

ON his way back to his office, M. Segmuller mentally reviewed the position of affairs; and came to the conclusion that as he had failed to take the citadel of defence by storm, he must resign himself to a regular protracted siege. He was exceedingly annoyed at the constant failures that had attended all Lecoq's efforts; for time was on the wing, and he knew that in a criminal investigation delay only increases the uncertainty of success. The more promptly a crime is followed by judicial action, the easier it is to find the culprit, and prove his guilt. The longer investigation is delayed the more difficult it becomes to adduce conclusive evidence.

In the present instance there were various matters that M. Segmuller might at once attend to. With which should he begin? Ought he not to confront May, the Widow Chupin, and Polyte with the bodies of their victims? Such horrible meetings have at times the most momentous results, and more than one murderer, when unsuspectedly brought into the presence of his victim's lifeless corpse has changed colour and lost his assurance.

Then there were other witnesses, whom M. Segmuller might examine. Papillon, the cab driver; the concierge of the house in the Rue de Bourgogne—where the two women, flying from the Poivrière had momentarily taken refuge; as well as a certain Madame Milner, landlady of the Hôtel de Mariembourg. In addition, it would also be advisable to summon, with the least possible delay, some of the people residing in the vicinity of the Poivrière; together with some of Polyte's habitual companions, and the landlord of the Rainbow, where the victims and the murderer had apparently passed the evening of the crime. Of course, there was no reason to expect any great revelations from any of these witnesses, still they might know something, they might have an opinion to express, and in the present darkness one single ray of light, however faint might mean salvation.

Obedying the magistrate's orders, Goguet, the smiling clerk, had just finished drawing up at least a dozen summonses, when Lecoq returned from the Préfecture. M. Segmuller at once asked him the result of his errand.

"Ah sir," replied the young detective, "I have a fresh proof of that mysterious accomplice's skill. The permit that was used yesterday to

see young Chupin, was in the name of his mother's sister, a woman named Rose Pitard. A visiting card was given her more than a week ago, in compliance with a request endorsed by the commissary of police of her district."

The magistrate's surprise was so intense that it imparted to his face an almost ludicrous expression. "Is this aunt also in the plot?" he murmured.

"I don't think so," replied Lecoq shaking his head. "At all events, it wasn't she who went to the prison parlour yesterday. The clerks at the Préfecture remember the widow's sister very well, and gave me a full description of her. She's a woman over five feet high, with a very dark complexion; and very wrinkled and weather-beaten about the face. She's quite sixty years old; whereas, yesterday's visitor was short and fair, and not more than forty-five."

"If that's the case," interrupted M. Segmuller, "this visitor must be one of our fugitives."

"I don't think so."

"Who do you suppose she was, then?"

"Why, the landlady of the Hôtel de Mariembourg—that clever woman who succeeded so well in deceiving me. But she had better take care! There are means of verifying my suspicions."

The magistrate scarcely heard Lecoq's last words, so enraged was he at the inconceivable audacity and devotion, displayed by so many people; all of whom were apparently willing to run the greatest risks, so long as they could only assure the murderer's incognito.

"But how could the accomplice have known of the existence of this permit?" he asked after a pause.

"Oh, nothing could be easier, sir," replied Lecoq. When the Widow Chupin and the accomplice had that interview at the station-house near the Barrière d'Italie, they both realized the necessity of warning Polyte. While trying to devise some means of getting to him, the old woman remembered her sister's visiting card, and the man made some excuse to borrow it."

"Yes, such must be the case," said M. Segmuller, approvingly. "It will be necessary to ascertain, however——"

"And I *will* ascertain," interrupted Lecoq, with a resolute air "if you will only entrust the matter to me, sir. If you will authorise me I will have two spies on the watch before to-night, one in the Rue de la Butte-aux-Cailles, and the other at the door of the Hôtel de Mariembourg. If the accomplice ventured to visit Toinon, or Madame Milner, he would be arrested; and then we should have our turn!"

However, there was no time to waste in vain words and idle boasting. Lecoq therefore checked himself, and took up his hat preparatory to departure. "Now," said he, "I must ask you sir, for my liberty; if you have any orders, you will find a trusty messenger in the corridor, Father Absinthe, one of my colleagues. I want to find out something about Lacheneur's letter and the diamond earring."

"Go, then," replied M. Segmuller, "and good luck to you!"

Good luck! Yes, indeed, Lecoq looked for it. If, up to the present moment, he had taken his successive defeats good-humouredly, it was because he believed that he had a talisman in his pocket, which was bound to ensure ultimate victory.

"I shall be very stupid if I can't discover the owner of such a valuable

jewel," he soliloquized, referring to the diamond earring. "And when I find the owner, I shall at the same time, discover our mysterious prisoner's identity."

The first step to be taken was to ascertain who the earring had been bought from. It would naturally be a tedious process to go from jeweller to jeweller and ask, "Do you know this jewel, was it set by you, and if so who did you sell it to?" But fortunately, Lecoq was acquainted with a man whose knowledge of the trade might at once throw light on the matter. This individual was an old Hollander, named Van Numen, who as a connoisseur in precious stones, was probably without his rival in Paris. He was employed by the Préfecture of Police, as an expert in all such matters. He was considered rich. Despite his shabby appearance, he was rightly considered rich, and, in point of fact, he was indeed far more wealthy than people generally supposed. Diamonds were his especial passion, and he always had several in his pocket, in a little box which he would pull out and open at least a dozen times an hour, just as a snuff-taker continually produces his snuff-box.

This worthy man greeted Lecoq very affably. He put on his glasses, examined the jewel with a grimace of satisfaction, and, in the tone of an oracle, remarked: "That stone is worth eight thousand francs, and it was set by Doisty, in the Rue de la Paix."

Twenty minutes later, Lecoq entered this well known jeweller's establishment. Van Numen had not been mistaken. Doisty immediately recognized the earring, which had, indeed, come from his shop. But who had he sold it to? He could not recollect, for it had passed out of his hands three or four years before.

"Wait a moment though," said he, "I will just ask my wife, who has a wonderful memory."

Madame Doisty truly deserved this eulogium. A single glance at the jewel enabled her to say that she had seen this earring before, and that the pair had been purchased from them by the Marchioness d'Arlange.

"You must recollect," she added, turning to her husband, "that the Marchioness only gave us nine thousand francs on account, and that we had all the trouble in the world to make her pay the balance."

Her husband did remember this circumstance; and in recording his recollection, he exchanged a significant glance with his wife.

"Now," said the detective, "I should like to have this marchioness's address."

"She lives in the Faubourg St. Germain," replied Madame Doisty, "near the Esplanade des Invalides."

Lecoq had refrained from any sign of satisfaction, while he was in the jeweller's presence. But, directly he had left the shop, he evinced such delirious joy that the passers-by asked themselves in amazement if he were not mad. He did not walk, but fairly danced over the stones, gesticulating in the most ridiculous fashion, as he addressed this triumphant monologue to the empty air: "At last," said he, "this affair emerges from the mystery that has enshrouded it. At last I reach the veritable actors in the drama, the exalted personages whose existence I had suspected. Ah! Gérol, my illustrious General! you talked about a Russian princess, but you will be obliged to content yourself with a simple marchioness."

But the vertigo that had seized the young detective gradually disappeared. His good sense re-asserted itself, and looking calmly at the situation he felt that he should need all his presence of mind, penetration, and sagacity to bring

the expedition to a successful finish. What course should he pursue, on entering the marchioness's presence, in order to draw from her a full confession and to obtain full particulars of the murder, as well as the murderer's name !

"It will be best to threaten her, to frighten her into confession," he soliloquized. "If I give her time for reflection, I shall learn nothing."

He paused in his cogitations, for he had reached the residence of the Marchioness d'Arange—a charming mansion with a court-yard in front and garden in the rear. Before entering, he deemed it advisable to obtain some information concerning the inmates.

"It is here, then," he murmured, "that I am to find the solution of the enigma ! Here, behind those embroidered curtains dwells the frightened fugitive of the other night. What agony of fear must torture her since she has discovered the loss of her earring !"

For more than an hour, standing under a neighbouring *porte-cochère*, Lecoq remained watching the house. He would have liked to see the face of any one ; but the time passed by and not even a shadow could be detected behind the curtain ; not even a servant passed across the court-yard. At last, losing patience, the young detective determined to make inquiries in the neighbourhood, for he could not take a decisive step without obtaining some knowledge of the people he was to encounter. While wondering where he could obtain the information he required, he perceived, on the opposite side of the street, the keeper of a wine-shop smoking on his doorstep.

At once approaching and pretending that he had forgotten an address, Lecoq politely asked for the house where the Marchioness d'Arange resided. Without a word, and without even condescending to take his pipe from his mouth, the man pointed to the mansion, which Lecoq had previously watched.

There was a way however, to make him more communicative, namely, to enter the shop, call for something to drink, and invite the landlord to drink as well. This was what Lecoq did, and the sight of two well-filled glasses unbound, as by enchantment, the man's hitherto silent tongue. The young detective could not have found a better person to question, for this same individual had been established in the neighbourhood for ten years, and enjoyed among the servants of the aristocratic families here residing a certain amount of confidence.

"I pity you if you are going to the marchioness's house to collect a bill," he remarked to Lecoq. "You will have plenty of time to learn the way here before you see your money. You will only be another of the many creditors who never let her bell alone."

"The deuce ! Is she as poor as that ?"

"Poor ! Why, every one knows that she has a comfortable income ; without counting this house. But when one spends double one's income every year, you know—"

The landlord stopped short, to call Lecoq's attention to two ladies who were passing along the street, one of them, a woman of forty, dressed in black ; the other, a girl halfway through her teens. "There," quoth the wine-seller, "goes the marchioness's grand-daughter, Mademoiselle Claire, with her governess, Mademoiselle Smith."

Lecoq's head whirled. "Her grand-daughter !" he stammered.

"Yes—the daughter of her deceased son, if you prefer it."

"How old is the marchioness, then ?"

"At least sixty: but one would never suspect it. She is one of those persons who live a hundred years. And what an old wretch she is too! She would think no more of knocking me over the head than I would of emptying this glass of wine—"

"Excuse me," interrupted Lecoq, "but does she live alone in that great house?"

"Yes—that is—with her grand-daughter, the governess, and two servants. But what is the matter with you?"

This last question was not uncalled-for; for Lecoq had turned deadly white. The magic edifice of his hopes had crumbled beneath the weight of this man's words as completely as if it were some frail house of cards erected by a child. He had only sufficient strength to murmur: "Nothing—nothing at all."

Then, as he could endure this torture of uncertainty no longer, he went towards the marchioness's house and rang the bell. The servant who came to open the door examined him attentively, and then announced that Madame d'Arlange was in the country. He evidently fancied that Lecoq was a creditor.

But the young detective insisted so adroitly, giving the lackey to understand so explicitly that he did not come to collect money, and speaking so earnestly of urgent business, that the servant finally admitted him to the hall, saying that he would go and see if madame had really gone out.

Fortunately for Lecoq, she happened to be at home, and an instant afterwards the valet returned requesting the young detective to follow him. After passing through a large and magnificently furnished drawing-room, they reached a charming boudoir, hung with rose-coloured curtains, where, sitting by the fireside, in a large easy-chair, Lecoq found an old woman, tall, bony, and terrible of aspect, her face loaded with paint, and her person covered with ornaments. This aged coquette was Madame, the Marchioness, who, for the time being, was engaged in knitting a stripe of green wool. She turned towards her visitor just enough to show him the rouge on one cheek, and then, as he seemed rather frightened—a fact flattering to her vanity—she spoke in an affable tone. "Ah, well! young man," said she, "what brings you here?"

In point of fact, Lecoq was not frightened, but he was intensely disappointed to find that Madame d'Arlange could not possibly be one of the women who had escaped from the Widow Chupin's hovel on the night of the murder. There was nothing about her appearance that corresponded in the least degree with the descriptions given by Papillon.

Remembering the small foot-prints left in the snow by the two fugitives, the young detective glanced moreover at the marchioness's feet, just perceivable beneath her skirt and his disappointment reached its climax when he found that they were truly colossal in size.

"Well? are you dumb?" inquired the old lady, raising her voice.

Without making a direct reply, Lecoq produced the precious earring, and placing it upon the table beside the marchioness, remarked: "I bring you this jewel, madame, which I have found, and which, I am told, belongs to you."

Madame d'Arlange laid down her knitting and proceeded to examine the earring. "It is true," she said, after a moment, "that this ornament formerly belonged to me. It was a fancy I had, about four years ago, and it cost me dear—at least twenty thousand francs. Ah! Doisty, the man who sold me those diamonds, must make a handsome income. But I had a grand-daughter to educate! and pressing need of money compelled me to sell them."

"To whom," asked Lecoq, eagerly.

"Eh?" exclaimed the old lady, evidently shocked at his audacity, "you are very inquisitive, upon my word!"

"Excuse me, madame, but I am so anxious to find the owner of this valuable ornament."

Madame d'Arlange regarded her visitor with an air of mingled curiosity and surprise. "Such honesty!" said she. "Oh, oh! And, of course, you don't hope for a sou by way of reward—"

"Madame!"

"Good, good! There is not the least need for you to turn as red as a poppy, young man. I sold these diamonds to a great Austrian lady—the Baroness de Watchau."

"And where does this lady reside?"

"At the Pere la Chaise, probably, since she died about a year ago. Ah! these women of the present day—an extra waltz, or the merest draught, and it's all over with them! In my time, after each galop, we girls used to swallow a tumbler of sweetened wine, and sit down between two open doors. And we did very well, as you see."

"But, madame," insisted Lecoq, "the Baroness de Watchau must have left some one behind her—a husband, or children—"

"No one but a brother, who holds a court position at Vienna; and who could not leave even to attend the funeral. He sent orders that all his sister's personal property should be sold—not even excepting her wardrobe—and the money sent to him."

Lecoq could not repress an exclamation of disappointment. "How unfortunate!" he murmured.

"Why?" asked the old lady. "Under these circumstances, the diamond will probably remain in your hands, and I am rejoiced that it should be so. It will be a fitting reward for your honesty."

Madame d'Arlange was naturally not aware that her remark implied the most exquisite torture for Lecoq. Ah! if it should be as she said, if he should *never* find the lady who had lost this costly jewel? Smarting under the marchioness's unintended irony, he would have liked to apostrophize her in angry terms; but it could not be, for it was advisable if not absolutely necessary that he should conceal his true identity. Accordingly, he contrived to smile, and even stammered an acknowledgment of Madame d'Arlange's good wishes. Then, as if he had no more to expect he made her a low bow and withdrew.

This new misfortune well-nigh overwhelmed him. One by one all the threads upon which he had relied to guide him out of this intricate labyrinth were breaking in his hands. In the present instance he could scarcely be the dupe of some fresh comedy, for if the murderer's accomplice had taken Doisty the jeweller into his confidence, he would have instructed him to say that the earring had never come from his establishment, and that he could not consequently tell who it had been sold to. On the contrary, however, Doisty and his wife had readily given Madame d'Arlange's name and all the circumstances pointed in favour of their sincerity. Then, again, there was good reason to believe in the veracity of the marchioness's assertions. They were sufficiently authenticated by a significant glance which Lecoq had detected between the jeweller and his wife. The meaning of this glance could not be doubted. It implied plainly that both husband and wife were of opinion that in buying these earrings, the marchioness had engaged in one of those little speculations which are more common than

many people might suppose among ladies moving in high-class society. Being in urgent want of ready money, she had bought on credit at a high price to sell for cash at a loss.

As Lecoq was anxious to investigate the matter as far as possible he returned to Doisty's establishment, and, by a plausible pretext, succeeded in gaining a sight of the books in which the jeweller recorded his transactions. He soon found the sale of the earrings duly recorded—specified by Madame Doisty at the date—both in the day-book and the ledger. Madame d'Arange was first paid 9,000 francs on account and the balance of the purchase money (an equivalent sum), had been received in instalments at long intervals subsequently. Now, if it had been easy for Madame Milner to make a false entry in her traveller's registry at the Hôtel de Mariembourg, it was absurd to suppose that the jeweller had falsified all his accounts for four years. Hence, the facts were indisputable; and yet, the young detective was not satisfied.

He hurried to the Faubourg-Saint-Honoré, to the house formerly occupied by the Baroness de Watchau, and there found a good-natured concierge, who at once informed him that after the Baroness's death, her furniture and personal effects had been taken to the great auction mart in the Rue Drouot; the sale being conducted by M. Petit, the eminent auctioneer.

Without losing a minute, Lecoq hastened to this individual's office. M. Petit remembered the Watchau sale very well; it had made quite a sensation at the time, and on searching among his papers he soon found a long catalogue of the various articles sold. Several lots of jewellery were mentioned, with the sums paid, and the names of the purchasers; but there was not the slightest allusion to these particular earrings. When Lecoq produced the diamond he had in his pocket, the auctioneer could not remember that he had ever seen it; though of course this was no evidence to the contrary, for as he himself remarked—so many articles passed through his hands! However, this much he could declare upon oath: the baroness's brother, her only heir, had preserved nothing—not so much as a pin's worth of his sister's effects: although he had been in a great hurry to receive the proceeds, which amounted to the pleasant sum of one hundred and sixty-seven thousand five hundred and thirty francs, all expenses deducted.

"So everything this lady possessed was sold?" inquired Lecoq.

"Everything."

"And what is the name of this brother of hers?"

"Watchau, also. The baroness had probably married one of her relatives. Until last year, her brother occupied a very prominent diplomatic position. I think he now resides at Berlin."

Certainly this information would not seem to indicate that the auctioneer had been tampered with; and yet Lecoq was not satisfied. "It is very strange," he thought, as he walked towards his lodgings, "that whichever side I turn, in this affair, I find mention of Germany. The murderer comes from Leipsic, Madame Milner must be a Bavarian, and now here is an Austrian baroness."

It was too late to make any further inquiries that evening, and Lecoq went to bed; but the next morning, at an early hour, he resumed his investigations with fresh ardour. There now seemed only one remaining clue to success: the letter signed "Lacheneur," which had been found in the pocket of the murdered soldier. This letter, judging from the half-effaced heading at the top of the note-paper, must have been written in some café on the Boulevard Beaumarchais. To discover which precise café would be

mere child's play; and indeed the fourth landlord to whom Lecoq exhibited the letter recognized the paper as his. But neither he, nor his wife, nor the young lady at the counter, nor the waiters, nor any of the customers present at the time, had ever once heard mention made of this singular name—Lacheneur.

And now what was Lecoq to do? Was the case utterly hopeless? Not yet. Had not the spurious soldier declared that this Lacheneur was an old comedian? Seizing upon this frail clue, as a drowning man clutches at the merest fragment of the floating wreck, Lecoq turned his steps in another direction, and hurried from theatre to theatre, asking every one, from door-keeper to manager: "Don't you know an actor named Lacheneur?"

Alas! one and all gave a negative reply, at times indulging in some rough joke at the oddity of the name. And when any one asked the young detective what the man he was seeking was like, what could he reply? His answer was necessarily limited to the virtuous Toinon's phrase: "I thought him a very respectable-looking gentleman." This was not a very graphic description, however, and besides, it was rather doubtful what a woman like Polyte Chupin's wife might mean by the word "respectable." Did she apply it to the man's age, to his personal aspect, or to his apparent fortune.

Sometimes those whom Lecoq questioned would ask what parts this comedian of his was in the habit of playing; and then the young detective could make no reply whatever. He kept for himself the harrassing thought that the rôle now being performed by the unknown Lacheneur was driving him—Lecoq—wild with despair.

Eventually, our hero had recourse to a method of investigation, which strange to say, the police seldom employ, save in extreme cases, although it is at once sensible and simple, and generally fraught with success. It consists in examining all the hotel and lodging-house registers, in which the landlords are compelled to record the names of their tenants, even should the latter merely sojourn under their roofs for a single night.

Rising long before daybreak, and going to bed late at night, Lecoq spent all his time in visiting the countless hotels, and furnished lodgings in Paris. But still and ever his search was vain. He never once came across the name of Lacheneur; and at last he began to ask himself if such a name really existed, or if it were not some pseudonym invented for convenience. He had not found it even in Didot's directory, the so called *Almanach Bottin*, where one finds all the most singular and absurd names in France—those which are formed of the most fantastic mingling of syllables.

Still, nothing could daunt him or turn him from the almost impossible task he had undertaken; and his obstinate perseverance well-nigh developed into monomania. He was no longer subject to occasional out-bursts of anger, quickly repressed; but lived in a state of constant exasperation, which soon impaired the clearness of his mind. No more theories, or ingenious deductions; no more subtle reasoning. He pursued his search, without method and without order—much as Father Absinthe might have done when under the influence of alcohol. Perhaps he had come to rely less upon his own shrewdness than upon chance to reveal to him the substance of the mystery, of which he had as yet only detected the shadow.

XVIII.

WHEN a heavy stone is thrown into a lake a considerable commotion ensues ; the water spouts and seethes and bubbles, and frequently a tall jet leaps into the air. But all this agitation only lasts for a moment ; the bubbling subsides as the circles of the passing whirlpool grow larger and larger ; the surface regains at last its customary smoothness ; and soon no trace remains of the passage of the stone, now buried in the depths below.

So it is with the events of our daily life, however momentous they may appear at the hour of their occurrence. It seems as if their impression would last for years ; but no, they speedily sink into the depths of the past, and time obliterates their passage—just as the water of the lake closes over and hides the stone, for an instant the cause of such commotion. Thus it was that at the end of a fortnight the frightful crime committed in the Widow Chupin's drinking-den, the triple murder, which had made all Paris shudder, which had furnished the material for so many newspaper articles, and the topic for such indignant comments, was completely forgotten. Indeed, had the tragedy at the Poivrière occurred in the times of Charlemagne, it could not have passed more thoroughly out of people's minds. It was remembered only in three places, at the Dépôt, at the Préfecture de Police, and at the Palais de Justice.

M. Segmuller's repeated efforts had proved as unsuccessful as Lecoq's. Skilful questioning, ingenious insinuations, forcible threats and seductive promises had proved powerless to overcome the dogged spirit of absolute denial, which persistently animated, not merely the prisoner May, but also the Widow Chupin, her son Polyte, Toinon the Virtuous, and Madame Milner. The evidence of these various witnesses showed plainly enough that they were all in league with the mysterious accomplice ; but what did this knowledge avail ? Their attitude never varied ! And, even if at times their looks gave the lie to their denials, one could always read in their eyes an unshaken determination to conceal the truth.

There were moments when the magistrate, overpowered by a sense of the insufficiency of the purely moral weapons at his disposal, almost regretted that the Inquisition was suppressed. Yes, in presence of the lies that were told him, lies so impudent that they were almost insults, he no longer wondered at the judicial cruelties of the Middle Ages, or at the use of the muscle-breaking rack, the flesh-burning red hot pincers, and other horrible instruments, which, by the physical torture they inflicted, forced the most obstinate culprit to confess. The prisoner May's manner was virtually unaltered ; and far from showing any signs of weakness, his assurance had if anything, increased, as though he were confident of ultimate victory and as though he had in some way learnt that the prosecution had failed to make the slightest progress.

On one occasion, when summoned before M. Segmuller, he ventured to remark in a tone of covert irony. "Why do you keep me confined so long in a secret cell, ? Am I never to be set at liberty or sent to the assizes. Am I to suffer much longer on account of your fantastic idea, that I am some great personage in disguise ?"

"I shall keep you until you have confessed," was M. Segmuller's answer.

"Confessed what?"

"Oh! you know very well."

The prisoner shrugged his shoulders at these last words, and then in a tone of mingled despondency and mockery retorted: "In that case there is no hope of my ever leaving this cursed prison!"

It was probably this conviction that induced him to make all seeming preparations for an indefinite stay. He applied for and obtained a portion of the contents of the trunk found at the Hôtel de Mariembourg, and evinced great joy when the various knick-nacks and articles of clothing were handed over to him. Thanks to the money found upon his person when arrested, and deposited with the prison registrar, he was, moreover, able to procure many little luxuries, which are never denied to unconvicted prisoners, no matter what may be the charges against them for they have a right to be considered as innocent until a jury has decided to the contrary. To while away the time, May next asked for a volume of Béranger's songs, and his request being granted, he spent most of the day in learning several of the ditties by heart, singing them, in a loud voice, and with considerable taste. This fancy having excited some comment he pretended that he was cultivating a talent which might be useful to him when he was set at liberty. For he had no doubt of his acquittal; at least, so he declared; and if he were anxious about the date of his trial, he did not show the slightest apprehension concerning its result.

He was never despondent save when he spoke of his profession. To all appearance he pined for the stage, and, in fact, he almost wept when he recalled the fantastic, many-coloured costumes, clad in which he had once appeared before crowded audiences—audiences that had been convulsed with laughter by his sallies of wit, delivered between bursts of noisy music. He seemed to have become altogether a better fellow; more frank, communicative, and submissive. He eagerly embraced every opportunity to babble about his past, and over and over again did he recount the adventures of the roving life he had led whilst in the employ of M. Simpson, the showman. He had, of course, travelled a great deal; and he remembered everything he had seen; possessing, moreover, an inexhaustible fund of amusing stories, with which he entertained his custodians. His manner and his words were so natural that head-keepers and subordinate turnkeys alike were quite willing to give credit to his assertions.

The governor of the Dépôt alone remained unconvinced. He had declared that this pretended buffoon must be some dangerous criminal who had escaped from Cayenne, and who for this reason was determined to conceal his antecedents. Such being this functionary's opinion he tried every means to substantiate it. Accordingly, during an entire fortnight, May was submitted to the scrutiny of innumerable members of the police-force, to whom were added all the more notable private detectives of the capital. No one recognised him, however, and although his photograph was sent to all the prisons and police-stations of the empire, not one of the officials could recognise his features.

Other circumstances occurred, each of which had its influence, and one and all of them speaking in the prisoner's favour. For instance, the second bureau of the Préfecture de Police found positive traces of the existence of a strolling artist, named Tringlot, who was probably the man referred to in May's story. This Tringlot had been dead several years. Then again, inquiries made in Germany, revealed the fact that a certain M. Simpson was

very well known in that country, where he had achieved great celebrity as a circus manager.

In presence of this information and the negative result of the scrutiny to which May had been subjected, the governor of the Dépôt abandoned his views and openly confessed that he had been mistaken. "The prisoner, May," he wrote to the magistrate, "is really and truly what he pretends to be. There can be no further doubt on the subject." This missive it may be added, was sent at Gévrol's instigation.

So thus it was that M. Segmuller and Lecoq alone remained of their opinion. This opinion was at least worthy of consideration, as they alone knew all the details of the investigation which had been conducted with such strict secrecy; and yet this fact was of little import. It is not merely unpleasant, but often extremely dangerous to struggle on against all the world, and unfortunately for truth and logic one man's opinion correct though it may be, is nothing in the balance of daily life against the faulty views of a thousand adversaries.

The "May affair" had soon become notorious among the members of the police-force; and whenever Lecoq appeared at the Préfecture, he had to brave his colleagues' sarcastic pleasantry. Nor did M. Segmuller escape scot free; for more than one fellow-magistrate meeting him on the stairs or in the corridor, inquired, with a smile, what he was doing with his Caspar-Hauser, his man in the Iron Mask, in a word, with his mysterious mountebank. When thus assailed, both M. Segmuller and Lecoq could scarcely restrain those movements of angry impatience, which come naturally to a person who feels certain he is in the right and yet cannot prove it.

"Ah, me!" sometimes exclaimed the magistrate, "why did d'Escorval break his leg? Had it not been for that cursed mishap, he would have been obliged to endure all these perplexities, and I—I should be enjoying myself like other people."

"And I thought myself so shrewd!" murmured the young detective by his side.

Little by little, anxiety did its work. Magistrate and detective both lost their appetites and looked haggard; and yet the idea of yielding never once occurred to them. Although of very different natures, they were both determined to persevere in the task they had set themselves—that of solving this tantalizing enigma. Lecoq, indeed, had resolved to renounce all other claims upon his time, and to devote himself entirely to the study of the case. "Henceforth," he said to M. Segmuller, "I also will constitute myself a prisoner; and although the suspected murderer will be unable to see me, I shall not lose sight of him!"

It so happened that there was a loft between the cell occupied by May and the roof of the prison, a loft of such diminutive proportions that a man of average height could not stand upright in it. This loft had neither window nor skylight, and the gloom would have been intense, had not a few faint sunrays struggled through the interstices of some ill-adjusted tiles. In this inattractive garret Lecoq established himself one fine morning, just at the hour when May was taking his daily walk in the court-yard of the prison accompanied by a couple of keepers. Under these circumstances there was no fear of Lecoq's movements attracting the prisoner's notice or suspicion. The garret had a paved floor, and first of all the young detective removed one of the stones with a pickaxe he had brought for the purpose. Beneath this stone he found a timber beam through which he next proceeded to bore a hole of funnel shape, large at the top and gradually dwindle.

ling until on piercing the ceiling of the cell it was no more than two-thirds of an inch in diameter. Prior to commencing his operations, Lecoq had visited the prisoner's quarters and had skilfully chosen the place of the projected aperture, so that the stains and graining of the beam would hide it from the view of any one below. He was yet at work when the governor of the Dépôt and his rival Gévrol appeared upon the threshold of the loft.

"So this is to be your observatory, Monsieur Lecoq !" remarked Gévrol, with a sneering laugh.

"Yes, sir."

"You will not be very comfortable here."

"I shall be less uncomfortable than you suppose, I have brought a large blanket with me, and I shall stretch myself out on the floor and manage to sleep here.

"So that, night and day, you will have your eye on the prisoner?"

"Yes, night and day."

"Without giving yourself time to eat or drink ?" inquired Gévrol.

"Excuse me ! Father Absinthe will bring me my meals, execute any errand I may have, and relieve me at times if necessary."

The jealous General laughed ; but his laugh, loud as it was, was yet a trifle constrained. "Well, I pity you," he said.

"Very possibly."

"Do you know what you will look like, with your eye glued to that hole?"

"Like what? Tell me, we needn't stand on ceremony."

"Ah, well ! you will look just like one of those silly naturalists who put all sorts of little insects under a magnifying glass, and spend their lives in watching them."

Lecoq had finished his work ; and rose from his kneeling position. "You couldn't have found a better comparison, General," said he. "I owe my idea to those very naturalists you speak about so slightly. By dint of studying those little creatures—as you say—under a microscope, these patient, gifted men discover the habits and instincts of the insect world. Very well then. What they can do with an insect, I will do with a man !"

"Oh ho !" said the governor of the prison, considerably astonished.

"Yes ; that's my plan," continued Lecoq. "I want to learn this prisoner's secret ; and I will do so. That I've sworn ; and success must be mine, for, however strong his courage may be, he will have his moments of weakness, and then I shall be present at them. I shall be present, if ever his will fails him, if believing himself alone he lets his mask fall, or forgets his part for an instant, if an indiscreet word escapes him in his sleep, if his despair elicits a groan, a gesture, or a look—I shall be there to take note of it."

The tone of resolution with which the young detective spoke made a deep impression upon the governor's mind. For an instant he was a believer in Lecoq's theory ; and he was impressed by the strangeness of this conflict between a prisoner, determined to preserve the secret of his identity, and the agent for the prosecution, equally determined to wrest it from him. "Upon my word, my boy, you are not wanting in courage and energy," said he.

"Misdirected as it may be," growled Gévrol, who, although he spoke very slowly and deliberately, was in his secret soul by no means convinced of what he said. Faith is contagious, and he was troubled in spite of himself by Lecoq's imperturbable assurance. What if this debutant in the profession should be right, and he, Gévrol, the oracle of the Préfecture, wrong !

What shame and ridicule would be his portion, then ! But once again he inwardly swore that this inexperienced youngster could be no match for an old veteran like himself, and then added aloud : " The prefect of police must have more money than he knows what to do with, to pay two men for such a nonsensical job as this."

Lecoq disdained to reply to this slighting remark. For more than a fortnight the General had profited of every opportunity to make himself as disagreeable as possible, and the young detective feared he would be unable to control his temper if the discussion continued. It would be better to remain silent, and to work and wait for success. To succeed would be revenge enough ! Moreover, he was impatient to see these unwelcome visitors depart ; believing, perhaps, that Gévrol was quite capable of attracting the prisoner's attention by some unusual sound.

As soon as they went away, Lecoq hastily spread his blanket over the stones and stretched himself out upon it in such a position that he could alternately apply his eye and his ear to the aperture. In this position he had an admirable view of the cell below. He could see the door, the bed, the table, and the chair ; only the small space near the window, and the window itself, were beyond his range of observation. He had scarcely completed his survey, when he heard the bolts rattle : the prisoner was returning from his walk. He seemed in excellent spirits, and was just completing what was, undoubtedly, a very interesting story, since the keeper who accompanied him lingered for a moment to hear the finish. Lecoq was delighted with the success of his experiment. He could hear as easily as he could see. Each syllable reached his ear distinctly, and he had not lost a single word of the recital, which was amusing, though rather coarse.

The turnkey soon left the cell ; the bolts rattled once more, and the key grated in the lock. After walking once or twice across his cell, May took up his volume of " Béranger " and for an hour or more seemed completely engrossed in its contents. Finally, he threw himself down upon his bed. Here he remained until meal time in the evening, when he rose and ate with an excellent appetite. He next resumed the study of his book, and did not go to bed until the lights were extinguished.

Lecoq knew well enough that during the night his eyes would not serve him, but, he trusted that his ears might prove of use, hoping that some tell-tale word might escape the prisoner's lips during his restless slumber. In this expectation he was disappointed. May tossed to and fro upon his pallet ; he sighed, and one might have thought he was sobbing, but not a syllable escaped his lips. He remained in bed until very late the next morning ; but on hearing the bell sound the hour of breakfast, eleven o'clock, he sprang from his couch with a bound, and after capering about his cell for a few moments, began to sing, in a loud and cheerful voice, the old ditty :

" Diogène !
Sous ton manteau, libre et content,
Je ris, je bois, sans gêne—"

The prisoner did not stop singing until a keeper entered his cell carrying his breakfast. The day now beginning differed in no respect from the one that had preceded it, neither did the night. The same might be said of the next day, and of those which followed. To sing, to eat, to sleep, to attend to his hands and nails—such was the life led by this so-called buffoon. His manner, which never varied, was that of a naturally cheerful man, terribly bored.

Such was the perfection of his acting, that, after six days and nights of constant surveillance, Lecoq had detected nothing decisive, nor even surprising. And yet he did not despair. He had noticed that every morning, while the employés of the prison were busy distributing the prisoners' food, May invariably began to sing the same ditty.

"Evidently this song is a signal," thought Lecoq. "What can be going on there by the window I can't see? I must know to-morrow."

Accordingly on the following morning he arranged that May should be taken on his morning walk at half-past ten o'clock, and he then insisted that the governor should accompany him to the prisoner's cell. That worthy functionary was not very well pleased with this change in the usual order of things. "What do you wish to show me?" he asked. "What is there so very curious to see?"

"Perhaps nothing," replied Lecoq, "but perhaps something of great importance."

Eleven o'clock sounding soon after, he began singing the prisoner's song, and he had scarcely finished the second line, when a bit of bread, no larger than a bullet, adroitly thrown through the window, dropped at his feet.

A thunderbolt falling in May's cell would not have terrified the governor as much as did this inoffensive projectile. He stood in silent dismay; his mouth wide open, his eyes starting from their sockets, as if he distrusted the evidence of his own senses. What a disgrace! An instant before he would have staked his life upon the inviolability of the secret cells; and now he beheld his prison dishonoured.

"A communication! a communication!" he repeated, with a horrified air. Quick as lightning, Lecoq picked up the missile. "Ah," murmured he, "I guessed that this man was in communication with his friends."

The young detective's evident delight changed the governor's stupor into fury. "Ah! my prisoners are writing!" he exclaimed, wild with passion. "My warders are acting as postmen! By my faith, this matter shall be looked into."

So saying, he was about to rush to the door when Lecoq stopped him. "What are you going to do, sir?" he asked.

"I am going to call all the employés of this prison together, and inform them that there is a traitor amongst them, and that I must know who he is, as I wish to make an example of him. And if, in twenty-four hours from now, the culprit has not been discovered, every man connected with this prison shall be removed."

Again he started to leave the room, and Lecoq, this time, had almost to use force to detain him. "Be calm, sir; be calm," he intreated.

"I *will* punish——"

"Yes, yes—I understand that—but wait until you have regained your self-possession. It is quite possible that the guilty party may be one of the prisoners who assist in the distribution of food every morning."

"What does that matter?"

"Excuse me, but it matters a great deal. If you noise this discovery abroad, we shall never discover the truth. The traitor will not be fool enough to confess his guilt. We must be silent and wait. We will keep a close watch and detect the culprit in the very act."

These objections were so sensible that the governor yielded. "So be it," he sighed, "I will try and be patient. But let me see the missive that was enclosed in this bit of bread."

Lecoq could not consent to this proposal. "I warned M. Segmuller," said he, "that there would probably be something new this morning ; and he will be waiting for me in his office. We must only examine the letter in his presence ?"

This remark was so correct that the governor assented ; and they at once started for the Palais de Justice. On their way, Lecoq endeavoured to convince his companion that it was wrong to deplore a circumstance which might be of incalculable benefit to the prosecution. "It was an illusion," said he, "to imagine that the governor of a prison could be more cunning than the prisoners intrusted to him. A prisoner is almost always a match in ingenuity for his custodians."

The young detective had not finished speaking when they reached the magistrate's office. Scarcely had Lecoq opened the door than M. Segmuller and his clerk rose from their seats. They both read important intelligence in our hero's troubled face. "What is it?" eagerly asked the magistrate.

Lecoq's sole response was to lay the pellet of bread upon M. Segmuller's desk. In an instant, the magistrate had opened it, extracting from the centre a tiny slip of the thinnest tissue paper. This he unfolded, and smoothed upon the palm of his hand. As soon as he glanced at it, his brow contracted. "Ah ! this note is written in cipher," he exclaimed, with a disappointed air.

"We must not lose patience," said Lecoq quietly. He took the slip of paper from the magistrate and read the numbers inscribed upon it. They ran as follows : "235, 15, 3, 8, 25, 2, 16, 208, 5, 360, 4, 36, 19, 7, 14, 118, 84, 23, 9, 40, 11, 99."

"And so we shall learn nothing from this note," murmured the governor.

"Why not?" the smiling clerk ventured to remark. "There is no system of cipher which cannot be read with a little skill and patience ; there are some people who make it their business."

"You are right," said Lecoq, approvingly. "And I, myself, once had the knack of it."

"What !" exclaimed the magistrate ; "do you hope to find the key to this cipher ?"

"With time, yes."

Lecoq was about to place the paper in his breast-pocket, when the magistrate begged him to examine it a little further. He did so ; and after a while, his face suddenly brightened. Striking his forehead with his open palm, he cried : "I've found it !"

An exclamation of incredulous surprise simultaneously escaped the magistrate, the governor, and the clerk.

"At least I think so," added Lecoq, more cautiously. "If I am not mistaken the prisoner and his accomplice have adopted a very simple system called the double book-cipher. The correspondents first agree upon some particular book ; and both obtain a copy of the same edition. When one desires to communicate with the other, he opens the book hap-hazard, and begins by writing the number of the page. Then he must find on the same page the words that will express his thoughts. If the first word he wishes to write is the twentieth on the page, he places number 20 after the number of the page ; then he begins to count one, two, three, and so on, until he finds the next word he wishes to use. If this word happens to be the sixth, he writes figure 6 ; and he continues so on till he has finished his letter. You see, now, how the correspondent who receives the note,

must begin. He finds the page indicated, and then each figure represents a word."

"Nothing could be clearer," said the magistrate, approvingly.

"If this note," pursued Lecoq, "had been exchanged between two persons at liberty, it would be folly to attempt its translation. This simple system is the only one which has completely baffled inquisitive efforts, simply because there is no way of ascertaining the book agreed upon. But in this instance such is not the case; May is a prisoner, and he has only one book in his possession. 'The Songs of Beranger.' Let this book be sent for——"

The governor of the Dépôt was actually enthusiastic, "I will run and fetch it myself," he interrupted.

But Lecoq, with a gesture, detained him. "Above all, sir," said he, "take care that May doesn't discover his book has been tampered with. If he has returned from his promenade, make some excuse to have him sent out of his cell again; and don't allow him to return there while we are using his book."

"Oh, trust me!" replied the governor, hastily leaving the room.

Less than a quarter of an hour afterwards he returned, carrying in triumph a little volume in 32mo. With a trembling hand Lecoq turned to page 235, and began to count. The fifteenth word on the page was '*I*;' the third afterwards, '*have*;' the eighth following '*told*;' the twenty-fifth, '*her*;' the second, '*your*;' the sixteenth, '*wishes*;' Hence, the meaning of those six numbers was: "I have told her your wishes."

The three persons who had witnessed this display of shrewdness could not restrain their admiration. "Bravo! Lecoq," exclaimed the magistrate. "I will no longer bet a hundred to one on May," thought the smiling clerk.

But Lecoq was still busily engaged in deciphering the missive, and soon in a voice trembling with gratified vanity, he read the entire note aloud. It ran as follows: "I have told her your wishes; she submits. Our safety is assured; we are waiting your orders to act. Hope! Courage!"

XIX.

YET what a disappointment it produced, after the fever of anxiety and expectation that had seized hold of everybody present. This strange epistle furnished no clue whatever to the mystery; and the ray of hope that had sparkled for an instant in M. Segmüller's eyes speedily faded away. As for the versatile Goguet he returned with increased conviction to his former opinion, that the prisoner had the advantage over his accusers.

"How unfortunate," remarked the governor of the Dépôt, with a shade of sarcasm in his voice, "that so much trouble, and such marvellous penetration, should be wasted!"

"So you think, sir, that I have wasted my time!" rejoined Lecoq in a tone of angry banter, a scarlet flush mantling at the same time over his features. "Such is not my opinion. This scrap of paper undeniably proves that if any one has been mistaken as regards the prisoner's identity, it is certainly not I."

"Very well," was the reply. "M. Gévrol and myself may have been mistaken; no one is infallible. But have you learned anything more than you knew before? Have you made any progress?"

"Why, yes. Now that people know the prisoner is not what he pretends to be, instead of annoying and hampering me, perhaps they will assist us to discover who he really is."

Lecoq's tone, and his allusion to the difficulties he had encountered, cut the governor to the quick. The knowledge that the reproof was not altogether undeserved, increased his resentment and determined him to bring this discussion with an inferior to an abrupt close. "You are right," said he, sarcastically. "This May must be a very great and illustrious personage. Only, my dear Monsieur Lecoq (for there is an only), do me the favour to explain how such an important personage could disappear, and the police not be advised of it? A man of rank, such as you suppose this prisoner to be, usually has a family, friends, relatives, protégés, and numerous connections; and yet not a single person has made any enquiry during the three weeks that this fellow May has been under my charge! Come, admit you never thought of that."

The governor had just advanced the only serious objection that could be found to the theory adopted by the prosecution. He was wrong however, in supposing that Lecoq had failed to foresee it; for it had never once been out of the young detective's mind; and he had racked his brain again and again to find some satisfactory explanation. At the present moment he would undoubtedly have made some angry retort to the governor's sneering criticism, as people are wont to do when their antagonists discover the weak spot in their armour, had not M. Segmuller opportunely intervened.

"All these recriminations do no good," he remarked, calmly; "we can make no progress while they continue. It would be much wiser to decide upon the course that is now to be pursued."

Thus reminded of the present situation of affairs, the young detective smiled; all his rancour was forgotten. "There is, I think, but one course to pursue," he replied in a modest tone; "and I believe it will be successful by reason of its simplicity. We must substitute a communication of our own composition for this one. That will not be at all difficult, since I have the key to the cipher. I shall only be obliged to purchase a similar volume of Beranger's songs; and May, believing that he is addressing his accomplice, will reply in all sincerity,—will reveal everything perhaps—"

"Excuse me!" interrupted the governor, "but how will you obtain possession of his reply?"

"Ah! you ask me too much. I know the way in which his letters have reached him. For the rest, I will watch and find a way—never fear!"

Goguet, the smiling clerk, could not conceal an approving grin. If he had happened to have ten francs in his pocket just then, he would have risked them all on Lecoq, without a moment's hesitation.

"First," resumed the young detective, "I will replace this missive by one of my own composition. To-morrow, at breakfast-time, if the prisoner gives the signal, Father Absinthe shall throw the morsel of bread enclosing my note through the window, while I watch the effect, through the hole in the ceiling of the cell."

Lecoq was so delighted with this plan of his, that he at once rang the bell, and when the magistrate's messenger appeared, he gave him half-a-franc and requested him to go at once and purchase some of the thinnest tissue paper. When this had been procured, Lecoq took his seat at the clerk's desk, and provided with the volume of Beranger's songs, began to compose a fresh note, copying as closely as possible the forms of the figures used by the unknown correspondent. The task did not occupy him more

than ten minutes, for, fearing lest he might commit some blunder, he reproduced most of the words of the original letter, giving them however, an entirely different meaning. When completed, his note read as follows: "I have told her your wishes; she does not submit. Our safety is threatened. We are awaiting your orders. I tremble."

Having acquainted the magistrate with the purport of the note, Lecoq next rolled up the paper, and enclosing it in the fragment of bread, remarked: "To-morrow we shall learn something new."

To-morrow! The twenty-four hours that separated the young man from the decisive moment, he looked forward to, seemed as it were a century; and he resorted to every possible expedient to hasten the passing of the time. At length, after giving precise instructions to Father Absinthe, he retired to his loft for the night. The hours seemed interminable and such was his nervous excitement that he found it quite impossible to sleep. On rising at daybreak he discovered that the prisoner was already awake. May was sitting on the foot of his bed, apparently plunged in thought. Suddenly he sprang to his feet and paced restlessly to and fro. He was evidently in an unusually agitated frame of mind: for he gesticulated wildly, and at intervals repeated: "What misery! My God! what misery!"

"Ah! my fine fellow," thought Lecoq, "you are anxious about the daily letter you failed to receive yesterday. Patience, patience! One of my writing will soon arrive."

At last the young detective heard the stir usually preceding the distribution of food. People were running to and fro, sabots clicked noisily in the corridors, and the keepers could be heard engaged in loud conversation. By-and-bye, the prison bell began to toll. It was eleven o'clock, and soon afterwards the prisoner commenced to sing his favourite song:—

"Diogène—!
Sous ton manteau libre et content—"

Before he commenced the third line; the slight sound caused by the fragment of bread as it fell upon the stone floor, caused him to pause abruptly.

Lecoq, at the opening in the ceiling above, was holding his breath, and watching with both eyes. He did not miss one of the prisoner's movements—not so much as the quiver of an eyelid. May looked first at the window, and then all round the cell, as if it were impossible for him to explain the arrival of this projectile. It was not until some little time had elapsed that he decided to pick it up. He held it in the hollow of his hand, and examined it with apparent curiosity. His features expressed intense surprise, and any one would have sworn that he was innocent of all complicity. Soon a smile gathered round his lips, and after a slight shrug of the shoulders, which might be interpreted: "Am I a fool?" he hastily broke the pellet in half. The sight of the paper which it contained seemed to amaze him.

"What does all this mean?" wondered Lecoq.

The prisoner had opened the note, and was examining, with knitted brows, the figures which were apparently destitute of all meaning to him. Then, suddenly rushing to the door of his cell, and, hammering upon it with clenched fists, he cried at the top of his voice:—"Here! keeper! here!"

"What do you want?" shouted a turnkey, whose footsteps Lecoq could hear hastening along the adjoining passage.

"I wish to speak to the magistrate."

"Very well. He shall be informed."

"Immediately, if you please. I have a revelation to make."

"He shall be sent for immediately."

Lecoq waited to hear no more. He tore down the narrow staircase leading from the loft, and rushed to the Palais de Justice to acquaint M. Segmuller with what had happened.

"What can all this mean?" he wondered, as he darted over the pavement. "Are we indeed approaching a dénouement? This much is certain, the prisoner was not deceived by my note. He could only decipher it with the aid of his volume of 'Beranger'; and he did not even touch the book; plainly then he hasn't read the letter."

M. Segmuller was no less amazed than the young detective. They both hastened to the prison, followed by the smiling clerk, who was the magistrate's inevitable shadow. On their way they encountered the governor of the Dépôt, arriving all in a flutter having been greatly excited by that important word, "revelation." The worthy official undoubtedly wished to express an opinion; but the magistrate checked him by the abrupt remark. "I know all about it; and I am coming."

When they had reached the narrow corridor leading to the secret cells, Lecoq passed on in advance of the rest of the party. He said to himself that by stealing upon the prisoner unawares, he might possibly find him engaged in surreptitiously reading the note. In any case, he would have an opportunity to glance at the interior of the cell. May was seated beside the table, his head resting on his hands. At the grating of the bolt, drawn by the governor himself, the prisoner rose to his feet, smoothed his hair, and remained standing in a respectful attitude, apparently waiting for the visitors to address him.

"Did you send for me?" inquired the magistrate.

"Yes, sir."

"You have, I understand, some revelation to make to me."

"I have something of importance to tell you."

"Very well! these gentlemen will retire."

M. Segmuller had already turned to Lecoq and the governor to request them to withdraw, when the prisoner motioned him not to do so.

"It is not necessary," said May, "I am, on the contrary, very well pleased to speak before these gentlemen."

"Speak, then."

May did not wait for the injunction to be repeated. Throwing his chest forward, and his head back as had been his wont throughout his examinations, whenever he wished to make an oratorical display, he began as follows: "It shall be for you to say, gentlemen, whether I'm an honest man or not. The profession matters little. One may, perhaps, act as the clown of a travelling show, and yet be an honest man—a man of honour."

"Oh, spare us your reflections!"

"Very well, sir, that suits me exactly. To be brief, then, here is a little paper which was thrown into my cell a few minutes ago. There are some numbers on it which may mean something; but I have examined them, and they are quite Greek to me."

He paused, and then handing Lecoq's missive to the magistrate, quietly added: "It was rolled up in a bit of bread."

This declaration was so unexpected, that it struck all the officials dumb with surprise, but the prisoner, without seeming to notice the effect he had produced, placidly continued: "I suppose the person who threw it, made a

mistake in the window. I know very well that it's a mean piece of business to denounce a companion in prison. It's a cowardly act and one may get into trouble by doing so: still, a fellow must be prudent when he's charged with murder as I am, and with something very unpleasant perhaps in store for him."

A terribly significant gesture of severing the head from the body left no doubt whatever as to what May meant by the "something very unpleasant."

"And yet I am innocent," continued May, in a sorrowful, reproachful tone.

The magistrate had by this time, recovered the full possession of his faculties. Fixing his eyes upon the prisoner and concentrating in one magnetic glance all his power of will, he slowly exclaimed: "You speak falsely! It was for you that this note was intended."

"For me! Then I must be the greatest of fools, or why should I have sent for you to show it you? For me? In that case, why didn't I keep it? Who knew, who could know that I had received it?"

These words were uttered with such a marvellous semblance of honesty, May's gaze was so frank and open, his voice rang so true, and his reasoning was so specious, that all the governor's doubts returned.

"And what if I could prove that you are uttering a falsehood?" insisted M. Segmuller. "What if I could prove it—here and now?"

"You would have to lie to do so! Oh! pardon! Excuse me; I mean —"

But the magistrate was not in a frame of mind to stickle for nicety of expression. He motioned May to be silent; and, turning to Lecoq, exclaimed: "Show the prisoner that you have discovered the key to his secret correspondence."

A sudden change passed over May's features. "Ah! it is this agent of police who says the letter was for me," he remarked in an altered tone. "The same agent who asserts that I am a grand seigneur." Then, looking disdainfully at Lecoq, he added: "Under these circumstances there's no hope for me. When the police are absolutely determined that a man shall be found guilty, they contrive to prove his guilt: everybody knows that. And when a prisoner receives no letters, an agent, who wishes to show that he is corresponding knows well enough how to write to him."

May's features wore such an expression of marked contempt, that Lecoq could scarcely refrain from making an angry reply. He restrained his impulse, however, in obedience to a warning gesture from the magistrate, and taking from the table the volume of Beranger's songs, he endeavoured to prove to the prisoner that each number in the note which he had shown M. Segmuller corresponded with a word on the page indicated, and that these various words formed several intelligible phrases. This overpowering evidence did not seem to trouble May in the least. After expressing the same admiration for this novel system of correspondence that a child would show for a new toy, he declared his belief that no one could equal the police in such machinations.

What could have been done in the face of such obstinacy? M. Segmuller did not even attempt to argue the point, but quietly retired, followed by his companions. Until they reached the governor's office, he did not utter a word; then, sinking down into an arm-chair, he exclaimed: "We must confess ourselves beaten. This man will always remain what he is—an inexplicable enigma."

"But what is the meaning of the comedy he has just played? I do not understand it at all," remarked the governor.

"Why," replied Lecoq, don't you see that he wished to persuade the magistrate that the first note, the one that fell into the cell while you and I were there yesterday, had been written by me in a mad desire to prove the truth of my theory at any cost? It was a hazardous project; but the importance of the result to be gained must have emboldened him to attempt it. Had he succeeded, I should have been disgraced; and he would have remained May—the stroller, without any further doubt as to his identity. But how could he know that I had discovered his secret correspondence, and that I was watching him from the loft overhead? That will probably never be explained."

The governor and the young detective exchanged glances of mutual distrust. "Eh! eh!" thought the former, "yes, indeed, that note which fell into the cell while I was there the other day might after all have been this crafty fellow's work. His Father Absinthe may have served him in the first instance just as he did subsequently."

While these reflections were fitting through the governor's mind, Lecoq suspiciously remarked to himself: "Who knows but what this fool of a governor confided everything to Gévrol? If he did so, the General, jealous as he is, would not have scrupled to play one such a damaging trick."

His thoughts had gone no further when Gognet, the smiling clerk, boldly broke the silence with the trite remark: "What a pity such a clever comedy didn't succeed."

These words startled the magistrate from his reverie. "Yes, a shameful farce," said he, "and one I would never have authorised, had I not been blinded by a mad longing to arrive at the truth. Such tricks only bring the sacred majesty of justice into contempt!"

At these bitter words, Lecoq turned white with anger. This was the second affront within an hour. The prisoner had first insulted him, and now it was the magistrate's turn. "I am defeated," thought he. "I must confess it. Fate is against me! Ah! if I had only succeeded!"

Disappointment alone had impelled M. Segmuller to utter these harsh words; they were both cruel and unjust, and the magistrate soon regretted them, and did everything in his power to drive them from Lecoq's recollection. They met every day after this unfortunate incident; and every morning, when the young detective came to give an account of his investigations, they had a long conference together. For Lecoq still continued his efforts; still laboured on with an obstinacy intensified by constant sneers; still pursued his investigations with that cold and determined zeal which keeps one's faculties on the alert for years.

The magistrate, however, was utterly discouraged. "We must abandon this attempt," said he. "All the means of detection have been exhausted. I give it up. The prisoner will go to the Assizes, to be acquitted or condemned under the name of May. I will trouble myself no more about the matter."

He said this, but the anxiety and disappointment caused by defeat, sneering criticism and perplexity, as to the best course to be pursued, so affected his health that he became really ill—so ill that he had to take to his bed.

He had been confined to his room for a week or so, when one morning Lecoq called to inquire after him.

"You see, my good fellow," quoth M. Segmuller, despondently, "that

this mysterious murderer is fatal to us magistrates. Ah ! he is too much for us ; he will preserve the secret of his identity."

"Possibly," replied Lecoq. "At all events, there is now but one way left to discover his secret : we must allow him to escape—and then track him to his lair."

This expedient, although at first sight a very startling one, was not of Lecoq's own invention, nor was it by any means novel. At all times, in cases of necessity, have the police closed their eyes and opened the prison doors for the release of suspected criminals. And not a few, dazzled by liberty and ignorant of being watched, have foolishly betrayed themselves. All prisoners are not like the Marquis de Lavalette, protected by royal connivance ; and one might enumerate many individuals who have been released, only to be re-arrested after confessing their guilt to police spies or auxiliaries who have won their confidence.

Naturally, however, it is but seldom, and only in special cases, and as a last resort, that such a plan is adopted. Moreover, the authorities only consent to it when they hope to derive some important advantage, such as the capture of a whole band of criminals. For instance, the police perhaps arrest one of a band. Now, despite his criminal propensities the captured culprit often has a certain sense of honour—we all know that there is honour among thieves—which prompts him to refuse all information concerning his accomplices. In such a case what is to be done? Is he to be sent to the Assizes by himself, tried and convicted, while his comrades escape scot free? No: it is best to set him at liberty. The prison doors are opened, and he is told that he is free. But each after-step he takes in the streets outside is dogged by skilful detectives ; and soon, at the very moment when he is boasting of his good luck and audacity to the comrades he has rejoined, the whole gang find themselves caught in the snare.

M. Segmuller knew all this, and much more, and yet, on hearing Lecoq's proposition, he made an angry gesture, and exclaimed: "Are you mad?"

"I think not, sir."

"At all events your scheme is a most foolish one!"

"Why so, sir? You will recollect the famous murder of the Chaboiseaus. The police soon succeeded in capturing the guilty parties ; but a robbery of a hundred and sixty thousand francs in bank-notes and coin had been committed at the same time, and this large sum of money couldn't be found. The murderers obstinately refused to say where they had concealed it ; for, of course, it would prove a fortune for them, if they ever escaped the gallows. In the meanwhile, however, the children of the victims were ruined. Now, M. Patrigent, the magistrate who investigated the affair, was the first to convince the authorities that it would be best to set one of the murderers at liberty. His advice was followed ; and three days later the culprit was surprised unearthing the money from among a bed of mushrooms. Now, I believe that our prisoner—"

"Enough!" interrupted M. Segmuller. "I wish to hear no more on the matter. I have, it seems to me, forbidden you to broach the subject."

The young detective hung his head with a hypocritical air of submission. But all the while he watched the magistrate out of the corner of his eye and noted his agitation. "I can afford to be silent," he thought: "he will return to the subject of his own accord."

And in fact M. Segmuller did return to it only a moment afterwards. "Suppose this man were released from prison," said he, "what would you do?"

"What would I do sir ! I would follow him like grim death ; I would not once let him out of my sight ; I would be his shadow."

"And do you suppose he wouldn't discover this surveillance ?"

"I should take my precautions."

"But he would recognize you at a single glance."

"No, sir, he wouldn't, for I should disguise myself. A detective who can't equal the most skilful actor in the matter of make-up is no better than an ordinary policeman. I have only practised at it for a twelvemonth, but I can easily make myself look old or young, dark or light, or assume the manner of a man of the world, or of some frightful ruffian of the *barrières*."

"I wasn't aware that you possessed this talent, Monsieur Lecoq."

"Oh ! I'm very far from the perfection I hope to arrive at ; though I may venture to say that in three days from now I could call on you and talk with you for half-an-hour without being recognized."

M. Segmuller made no rejoinder ; and it was evident to Lecoq that the magistrate had offered this objection rather in the hope of its being overruled, than with the wish to see it prevail.

"I think, my poor fellow," he at length observed, "that you are strangely deceived. We have both been equally anxious to penetrate the mystery that enshrouds this strange man. We have both admired his wonderful acuteness—for his sagacity is wonderful ; so marvellous, indeed, that it exceeds the limits of imagination. Do you believe that a man of his penetration would betray himself like an ordinary prisoner ? He will understand at once, if he is set at liberty, that his freedom is only given him so that we may surprise his secret."

"I don't deceive, myself, sir. May will guess the truth of course. I'm quite aware of that."

"Very well. Then, what would be the use of attempting what you propose ?"

"I have come to this conclusion," replied Lecoq, "May will find himself strangely embarrassed, even when he's set free. He won't have a sou in his pocket ; we know he has no trade, so what will he do to earn a living ? He may struggle along for a while ; but he won't be willing to suffer long. Man must have food and shelter, and when he finds himself without a roof over his head, without even a crust of bread to break, he will remember that he is rich. Won't he then try to recover possession of his property ? Yes, certainly he will. He will try to obtain money, endeavour to communicate with his friends, and I shall wait till that moment arrives. Months may elapse, before, seeing no signs of my surveillance, he may venture on some decisive step ; and then I will spring forward with a warrant for his arrest in my hand."

"And what if he should leave Paris ? What if he should go abroad ?"

"Oh, I will follow him. One of my aunts has left me a little land in the provinces worth about twelve thousand francs. I will sell it, and spend the last sou, if necessary, so long as I only have my revenge. This man has outwitted me as if I were a child, and I must have my turn."

"And what if he should slip through your fingers ?"

Lecoq laughed like a man that was sure of himself. "Let him try," he exclaimed : "I will answer for him with my life."

"Your idea is not a bad one," said M. Segmuller, eventually. "But you must understand that law and justice will take no part in such intrigues. All I can promise you is my tacit approval. Go, therefore, to the *Préfecture* ; see your superiors—"

With a really despairing gesture, the young man interrupted M. Segmuller. "What good would it do for *me* to make such a proposition?" he exclaimed. "They would not only refuse my request, but they would dismiss me on the spot, if my name is not already erased from the roll."

"What, dismissed, after conducting this case so well?"

"Ah, sir, unfortunately every one is not of that opinion. Tongues have been wagging busily during your illness. Somehow or other, my enemies have heard of the last scene we had with May; and impudently declare that it was *I*, who imagined all the romantic details of this affair, being eager for advancement. They pretend that the only reasons to doubt the prisoner's identity are those I have invented myself. To hear them talk at the Dépôt, one might suppose that I invented the scene in the Widow Chupin's cabin; imagined the accomplices; suborned the witnesses; manufactured the articles of conviction; wrote the first note in cipher as well as the second; duped Father Absinthe, and mystified the governor."

"The deuce!" exclaimed M. Segmuller; "in that case, what do they think of me?"

The wily detective's face assumed an expression of intense embarrassment. "Ah! sir," he replied with a great show of reluctance, "they pretend that you have allowed yourself to be deceived by me, and that you haven't weighed at their proper worth the proofs I've furnished."

A fleeting flush mantled over M. Segmuller's forehead. "In a word," said he, "they think I'm your dupe—and a fool besides."

The recollection of certain sarcastic smiles he had often detected on the faces of colleagues and subordinates alike, the memory of numerous covert allusions to Caspar Hauser, and the Man with the Iron Mask—allusions which had stung him to the quick—induced him to hesitate no longer.

"Very well! I will aid you, Monsieur Lecoq," he exclaimed. "I should like you to triumph over your enemies. I will get up at once and accompany you to the Palais de Justice. I will see the public prosecutor myself; I will speak to him, and plead your case for you."

Lecoq's joy was intense. Never, no never, had he dared to hope for such assistance. Ah! after this he would willingly go through fire on M. Segmuller's behalf. And yet, despite his inward exultation, he had sufficient control over his feelings, to preserve a sober face. This victory must be concealed under penalty of forfeiting the benefits that might accrue from it. Certainly, the young detective had said nothing that was untrue; but there are different ways of presenting the truth, and he had, perhaps, exaggerated a trifle in order to excite the magistrate's rancour, and win his needful assistance.

"I suppose," remarked M. Segmuller, who was now quite calm again—no outward sign of wounded vanity being perceptible—"I suppose you have decided what stratagem must be employed to lull the prisoner's suspicions if he is permitted to escape."

"I must confess, I haven't given it a thought," replied Lecoq. "Besides, what good would any such stratagem do? He knows too well that he is the object of suspicion, not to remain on the alert. Still, there is one precaution which I believe absolutely necessary, indispensable indeed, if we wish to be successful."

"What precaution do you mean?" inquired the magistrate.

"Well, sir, I think an order should be given to have May transferred to another prison. It doesn't in the least matter which; you can select the one you please."

"Why should we do that?"

"Because, during the few days preceding his release, it is absolutely necessary he should hold no communication with his friends outside, and that he should be unable to warn his accomplice."

"Then you think he's badly guarded where he is?" inquired M. Segmuller with seeming amazement.

"No, sir, I did not say that. I am satisfied that since the affair of the cipher note the governor's vigilance has been unimpeachable. However, news from outside certainly reaches the suspected murderer at the Dépôt; we have had material evidence—full proof of that—and besides—"

The young detective paused in evident embarrassment. He plainly had some idea in his head to which he feared to give expression.

"And besides?" repeated the magistrate.

"Ah, well, sir! I will be perfectly frank with you. I find that Gévrol enjoys too much liberty at the Dépôt; he is perfectly at home there, he comes and goes as he likes, and no one ever thinks of asking what he is doing, where he is going, or what he wants. No pass is necessary for his admission, and he can influence the governor just as he likes. Now, to tell the truth, I distrust Gévrol."

"Oh! Monsieur Lecoq!"

"Yes, I know very well that it's a bold accusation, but a man is not master of his presentiments: so there it is, I distrust Gévrol. Did the prisoner know that I was watching him from the loft, and that I had discovered his secret correspondence, was he ignorant of it? To my mind he evidently knew everything, as the last scene we had with him proves."

"I must say that's my own opinion," interrupted M. Segmuller.

"But how could he have known it?" resumed Lecoq. "He could not have discovered it by himself. I endured tortures for a whole week in the hope of solving the problem. But all my trouble was wasted. Now the supposition of Gévrol's intervention would explain everything."

M. Segmuller had turned pale with anger. "Ah! if I could really believe that!" he exclaimed; "if I were sure of it! Have you any proofs?"

The young man shook his head. "No," said he, "I haven't; but even if my hands were full of proofs I should not dare to show them. I should ruin my future. Ah, if ever I succeed, I must expect many such acts of treachery. There is hatred and rivalry in every profession. And, mark this, sir—I don't doubt Gévrol's honesty. If a hundred thousand francs were counted out upon the table and offered to him, he wouldn't even try to release a prisoner. But he would rob justice of a dozen criminals in the mere hope of injuring me, jealous as he is, and fearing lest I might obtain advancement."

How many things these simple words explained. Did they not give the key to many and many an enigma which justice has failed to solve, simply on account of the jealousy and rivalry that animate the detective force? Thus thought M. Segmuller, but he had no time for further reflection.

"That will do," said he, "go into the drawing-room for a moment. I will dress and join you there. I will send for a cab: for we must make haste if I am to see the public prosecutor to-day."

Less than a quarter of an hour afterwards M. Segmuller, who usually spent considerable time over his toilette, was dressed and ready to start. He and Lecoq were just getting into the cab that had been summoned when a footman in a stylish livery was seen approaching.

"Ah! Jean," exclaimed the magistrate, "How's your master?"

"Improving, sir," was the reply. "He sent me to ask how you were, and to inquire how that affair was progressing?"

"There has been no change since I last wrote to him. Give him my compliments, and tell him that I am out again."

The servant bowed. Lecoq took a seat beside the magistrate and the call started off.

"That fellow is one of D'Escorval's servants," remarked M. Segmuller. "He's richer than I, and can well afford to keep a footman."

"D'Escorval" ejaculated Lecoq, "the magistrate who—"

"Precisely. He sent his man to me two or three days ago, to ascertain what we were doing with our mysterious May."

"Then M. d'Escorval is interested in the case?"

"Prodigiously! I conclude it is because he opened the prosecution, and because the case rightfully belongs to him. Perhaps he regrets that it passed out of his hands, and thinks that he could have managed the investigation better himself. We would have done better with it if we could. I would give a good deal to see him in my place."

But this change would not have been at all to Lecoq's taste. "Ah," thought he, "such a fellow as D'Escorval would never have shown me such confidence as M. Segmuller." He had, indeed, good reason to congratulate himself: for that very day, M. Segmuller who was a man of his word, a man who never rested until he had carried his plans into execution, actually induced the authorities to allow May to be set at liberty; and the details of this measure only remained to be decided upon. As regards the proposed transfer of the suspected murderer to another prison, this was immediately carried into effect, and May was removed to Mazas where Lecoq had no fear of Gévrol's interference.

That same afternoon, moreover, the Widow Chupin received her conditional release. There was no difficulty as regards her son, Polyte. He had, in the meantime, been brought before the correctional court on a charge of theft; and, to his great astonishment, had heard himself sentenced to thirteen months' imprisonment. After this, M. Segmuller had nothing to do but to wait, and this was the easier as the advent of the Easter holidays gave him an opportunity to seek a little rest and recreation with his family in the provinces.

On the day he returned to Paris—the last of the recess, and by chance a Sunday—he was sitting alone in his library when his cook came to tell him that there was a man in the vestibule who had been sent from a neighbouring register-office to take the place of a servant he had recently dismissed. The new comer was ushered into the magistrate's presence and proved to be a man of forty or thereabouts, very red in the face and with carroty hair and whiskers. He was, moreover, strongly inclined to corpulence, and was clad in clumsy, ill-fitting garments. In a complacent tone, and with a strong Norman accent, he informed the magistrate that during the past twenty years he had been in the employment of various literary men, as well as of a physician, and notary; that he was familiar with the duties that would be required of him at the Palais de Justice, and that he knew how to dust papers without disarranging them. In short, he produced such a favourable impression, that although M. Segmuller reserved twenty-four hours in which to make further inquiries, he drew a twenty franc piece from his pocket on the spot and tendered it to the Norman valet as the first instalment of his wages.

But, instead of pocketing the proffered coin, the man, with a sudden change of voice and attitude, burst into a hearty laugh, exclaiming: "Do you think, sir, that May will recognise me?"

"Monsieur Lecoq!" cried the astonished magistrate.

"The same, sir; and I have come to tell you that if you are ready to release May, all my arrangements are now completed."

XX.

WHEN one of the investigating magistrates of the Tribunal of the Seine wishes to examine a person confined in one of the Paris prisons, he sends by his messenger to the governor of that particular jail, a so-called "order of extraction," a concise imperative formula, which reads as follows: "The keeper of—prison will give into the custody of the bearer of this order, the prisoner known as—, in order that he may be brought before us in our cabinet at the Palais de Justice." No more, no less, a signature, a seal, and everybody is bound to obey.

But from the moment of receiving this order until the prisoner is again incarcerated, the governor of the prison is relieved of all responsibility. Whatever may happen, his hands are clean. Minute precautions are taken, however, so that a prisoner may not escape during his journey from the prison to the Palais. He is carefully locked up in a compartment of one of the lugubrious vehicles that may be often seen waiting on the Quai de l'Horloge, or in the court-yard of the Sainte-Chapelle. This van conveys him to the Palais, and while he is awaiting examination, he is immured in one of the cells of the gloomy jail, familiarly known as "la Souricière" or the mouse-trap. On entering and leaving the van the prisoner is surrounded by guards; and on the road, in addition to the mounted troopers who always accompany these vehicles, there are prison warders or linesmen of the Garde de Paris installed in the passage between the compartments of the van and seated on the box with the driver. Hence, the boldest criminals ordinarily realize the impossibility of escaping from this ambulatory prison.

Indeed, statistics record only thirty attempts at escape in a period of ten years. Of these thirty attempts, twenty-five were ridiculous failures; four were discovered before their authors had conceived any serious hope of success; and only one man actually succeeded in alighting from the vehicle, and even he had not taken fifty steps before he was re-captured.

Lecoq was well acquainted with all these facts, and in preparing everything for May's escape, his only fear was lest the murderer might decline to profit of the opportunity. Hence, it was necessary to offer every possible inducement for flight. The plan the young detective had eventually decided on consisted in sending an order to Mazas for May to be despatched to the Palais de Justice. He could be placed in one of the prison vans, and at the moment of starting the door of his compartment would not be perfectly secured. When the van reached the Palais de Justice and discharged its load of criminals at the door of the "mouse trap" May would purposely be forgotten and left in the vehicle, while the latter waited on the Quai de l'Horloge, until the hour of returning to Mazas. It was scarcely possible that the prisoner would fail to embrace this apparently favourable opportunity to make his escape.

Everything was, therefore, prepared and arranged according to Lecoq's directions, on the Monday following the close of the Easter holidays; the

requisite "order of extraction" being entrusted to an intelligent man, with the most minute instructions.

Now, although the van in which May would journey was not to be expected at the Palais de Justice before noon, it so happened that at nine o'clock that same morning a queer-looking "loafer" having the aspect of an over-grown, over-aged "gamin de Paris" might have been seen hanging about the Préfecture de Police. He wore a tattered black woollen blouse, and a pair of wide, ill-fitting trousers, fastened about his waist by a leather strap. His boots betrayed a familiar acquaintance with the puddles of the *barrières*, and his cap was shabby and dirty though, on the other hand, his necktie, a pretentious silk scarf of flaming hue, was evidently quite fresh from some haberdasher's shop. No doubt it was a present from his sweetheart. This uncomely being had the unhealthy complexion, hollow eyes, slouching mien, and straggling beard common to his tribe. His yellow hair, cut closely at the back of the head, as if to save the trouble of brushing, was long in front and at the sides; being plastered down over his forehead and advancing above his ears in extravagant corkscrew ringlets.

What with his attire, his affected jaunty step, his alternate raising of either shoulder, and his way of holding his cigarette and of ejecting a stream of saliva from between his teeth, Polyte Chupin, had he been at liberty, would undoubtedly have proffered a paw, and greeted this *barrière* beauty as a "pal."

It was the 14th of April; the weather was lovely, and, on the horizon, the youthful foliage of the chestnut trees in the Tuileries gardens stood out against a bright blue sky. The "ethereal mildness" of "gentle Spring" seemed to have a positive charm for the tattered "loafer" who lazily loitered in the sunlight, dividing his attention between the passers-by and some men who were hauling sand from the banks of the Seine. Occasionally, however, he crossed the roadway and, strange to say, exchanged a few remarks with a neatly dressed, long-bearded, gentleman, who wore gold-rimmed spectacles over his nose, and drab silk gloves on his hands. This individual exhibited all the outward characteristics of eminent respectability, and seemed to take a remarkable interest in the contents of an optician's shop window.

Every now and then a policeman or an agent of the detective corps passed by on his way to the Préfecture, and the elderly gentleman or the "loafer" would at times run after these officials to ask for some trifling information. The person addressed replied and passed on; and then the "loafer" and the gentleman would join each other and laughingly exclaim: "Good!—there's another who doesn't recognize us."

And in truth the pair had just cause for exultation, good reason to be proud, for of some twelve or fifteen comrades they accosted, not one recognized the two detectives, Lecoq and Father Absinthe. For the loafer was none other than our hero, and the gentleman of such eminent respectability his faithful lieutenant.

"Ah!" quoth the latter with admiration, "I am not surprised they don't recognize me, since I can't recognize myself. No one but you, Monsieur Lecoq, could have so transformed me."

Unfortunately, for Lecoq's vanity, the good old fellow spoke at a moment when the time for idle conversation had passed. The prison van was just crossing the bridge at a brisk trot.

"Attention!" exclaimed the young detective, "there comes our friend! Quick!—to your post; remember my directions, and keep your eyes open!"

Near them, on the quay, was a large pile of timber, behind which Father Absinthe immediately concealed himself, whilst Lecoq, seizing a spade that was lying idle, hurried to a little distance and began digging in the sand. They did well to make haste. The van came onwards and turned the corner. It passed the two detectives, and with a noisy clang rolled under the heavy arch leading to "la Souricière." May was inside, as Lecoq assured himself on recognizing the keeper sitting beside the driver.

The van remained in the court-yard for more than a quarter of an hour. When it re-appeared, the driver had left his perch and was leading the horses by the bridle. He stationed the vehicle on the quay opposite the Palais de Justice, threw a covering over his horses, lighted his pipe, and quietly walked away. The moment for action was now swiftly approaching.

For a few minutes the anxiety of the two watchers amounted to actual agony ; nothing stirred—nothing moved. But at last the door of the van was opened with infinite caution, and a pale, frightened face became visible. It was the face of May. The prisoner cast a rapid glance around him. No one was in sight. Then as swiftly and as stealthily as a cat, he sprang to the ground, noiselessly closed the door of the vehicle, and walked quietly towards the bridge.

Lecoq breathed again. He had been asking himself if some trifling circumstance could have been forgotten or neglected, thus disarranging all his plans. He had been wondering if this strange man would refuse the dangerous liberty which had been offered him. But he had been anxious without cause. May had fled ; not thoughtlessly, but with premeditation.

From the moment when he was left alone, apparently forgotten, in the insecurely locked compartment, until he opened the door and glanced around him, sufficient time had elapsed for a man of his intellect and discernment to analyze and calculate all the chances of so grave a step. Hence, if he had stepped into the snare laid for him, it must be with a full knowledge of the risks he had to run. He and Lecoq were alone together, free in the streets of Paris, armed with mutual distrust, equally obliged to resort to strategy, and forced to hide from each other, Lecoq, it is true, had an auxiliary—Father Absinthe. But who could say that May would not be aided by his redoubtable accomplice ? Hence, it was a veritable duel, the result of which depended entirely upon the courage, skill, and coolness of the antagonists.

All these thoughts flashed through the young detective's brain with the quickness of lightning. Throwing down his spade, and running towards a sergeant de ville, who was just coming out of the Palais de Justice, he gave him a letter which was ready in his pocket. "Take this to M. Segmuller at once ; it is a matter of importance, said he."

The policeman attempted to question this "loafer" who was in correspondence with the magistrates ; but Lecoq had already darted off on the prisoner's trail.

May had covered but a short distance. He was sauntering along with his hands in his pockets ; his head high in the air, his manner composed and full of assurance. Had he reflected that it would be dangerous to run while so near the prison from which he had just escaped ? Or was he of opinion that as an opportunity of flight had been willingly furnished him, there was no danger of immediate re-arrest ? This was a point Lecoq could not decide. At all events, May showed no signs of quickening his pace even after crossing the bridge ; and it was with the same tranquil manner that he next crossed the Quai aux Fleurs and turned into the Rue de la Cité.

Nothing in his bearing or appearance proclaimed him to be an escaped prisoner. Since his trunk—that famous trunk which he pretended to have left at the Hôtel de Mariembourg—had been returned to him, he had been well supplied with clothing: and he never failed, when summoned before the magistrate, to array himself in his best apparel. The garments he wore that day were of black cloth and their cut combined with his manner gave him the appearance of a working man of the better class, taking a holiday.

His tread, hitherto firm and decided, suddenly became uncertain when, after crossing the Seine, he reached the Rue St. Jacques. He walked more slowly, frequently hesitated and glanced continually at the shops on either side of the way.

"Evidently he is seeking something," thought Lecoq; "but what?"

It was not long before he ascertained. Seeing a second-hand clothes' shop close by, May entered in evident haste. Lecoq at once stationed himself under a gateway on the opposite side of the street, and pretended to be busily engaged lighting a cigarette. The criminal being momentarily out of sight, Father Absinthe thought he could approach without danger.

"Ah, well," said he, "here's our man changing his fine clothes for coarser garments. He will ask for the difference in money; and they will give it him. You told me this morning: 'May without a sou'—that's the trump card in our game!"

"Nonsense! Before we begin to lament, let us wait and see what happens. It is not likely that shopkeeper will give him any money. He won't buy clothing of the first passer-by."

Father Absinthe withdrew to a little distance. He distrusted these reasons, but not Lecoq who gave them.

In the meanwhile, in his secret soul, Lecoq was cursing himself. Another blunder thought he, another weapon left in the hands of the enemy. How was it that he, who fancied himself so shrewd, had not foreseen this emergency? Calmness of mind returned however a moment afterwards when he saw May emerge from the shop, attired as when he entered it. Luck had for once been in the young detective's favour.

May actually staggered when he stepped out upon the pavement. His bitter disappointment could be read in his countenance, which disclosed the anguish of a drowning man who sees the frail plank which was his only hope of salvation snatched from his grasp by the ruthless waves.

What could have taken place? This Lecoq must know without a moment's delay. He gave a peculiar whistle, to warn his companion that he momentarily abandoned the pursuit to him; and having received a similar signal in response, he entered the shop. The owner was still standing behind the counter. Lecoq wasted no time in parleying. He merely showed his card to acquaint the man with his profession, and curtly asked; "What did the fellow want who was just in here?"

The shopkeeper seemed embarrassed. "It's a long story," he stammered.

"Then tell it!" said Lecoq, surprised at the man's hesitation.

"Oh, it's very simple. About twelve days ago, a man entered my shop with a bundle under his arm. He claimed to be a countryman of mine."

"Are you an Alsatian?"

"Yes, sir. Well, I went with this man to the wine-shop at the corner, where he ordered a bottle of good wine; and while we drank together, he asked me if I would consent to keep the package he had with him until one of his cousins came to claim it. To prevent any mistake, this cousin was

to say certain words—a countersign, as it were. I refused, shortly and decidedly, for the very month before I had got into trouble, and had been charged with receiving stolen goods, all by obliging a person in this same way. Well, you never saw a man so vexed and so surprised. What made me all the more determined in my refusal was that he offered me a good round sum in payment for my trouble. This only increased my suspicion, and I persisted in my refusal.”

The shopkeeper paused to take breath; but Lecoq was on fire with impatience. “And what then?” he insisted.

“Well, he paid for the wine, and went away. I had forgotten all about the matter, until that man came in here just now, and after asking me if I hadn’t a package for him, which had been left by one of his cousins, began to say some peculiar words—the countersign, no doubt. When I replied that I had nothing at all, he turned as white as his shirt; and I thought he was going to faint. All my suspicions came back to me. So when he afterwards proposed that I should buy his clothes, I told him I couldn’t think of it.”

All this was plain enough to Lecoq. “And this cousin who was here a fortnight ago, what was he like?” asked he.

“He was a tall, rather corpulent man, with a ruddy complexion, and white whiskers. Ah! I should recognise him in an instant!”

“The accomplice!” exclaimed Lecoq.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing that would interest you. Thank you. I am in a hurry. You will see me again; good morning.”

Lecoq had not remained five minutes in the shop; and yet, when he emerged, May and Father Absinthe were nowhere in sight. Still, the young detective was not at all uneasy on that score. In making arrangements with his old colleague for this pursuit Lecoq had foreseen such a situation and it had been agreed that if one of them were obliged to remain behind, the other, who was closely following May, should from time to time make chalk marks on the walls, shutters and facings of the shops, so as to indicate the route, and enable his companion to rejoin him. Hence, in order to know which way to go, Lecoq had only to glance at the buildings around him. The task was neither long nor difficult, for on the front of the third shop beyond that of the second-hand clothes-dealer, a superb dash of the crayon instructed him to turn into the Rue Saint-Jacques.

On he rushed in that direction, his mind busy at work with the incident that had just occurred. What a terrible warning that old clothes-dealer’s declaration had been! Ah! that mysterious accomplice was a man of foresight. He had even done his utmost to ensure his comrade’s salvation in the event of his being allowed to escape. What did the package the shopkeeper had spoken of contain? Clothes no doubt. Everything necessary for a complete disguise; money, papers, a forged passport most likely.

While these thoughts were rushing through Lecoq’s mind, he had reached the Rue Soufflot, where he paused for an instant to learn his way from the walls. This was the work of a second. A long chalk-mark on a watchmaker’s shop pointed to the Boulevard Saint-Michel, whither the young detective at once directed his steps. “The accomplice,” said he to himself, resuming his meditation, “didn’t succeed with that old clothes-dealer; but he isn’t a man to be disheartened by one rebuff. He has certainly taken other measures. How shall I divine what they are in order to defeat them?”

The supposed murderer had crossed the Boulevard Saint-Michel, and had

then taken to the Rue Monsieur-le-Prince, as Father Absinthe's dashes of the crayon proclaimed with many eloquent flourishes.

"One circumstance re-assures me," the young detective murmured, "May's going to this shop, and his consternation on finding that there was nothing for him there. The accomplice had informed him of his plans, but had *not* been able to inform him of their failure. Hence, from this hour, the prisoner is left to his own resources. The chain that bound him to his accomplice is broken; there is no longer an understanding between them. Everything depends now upon keeping them apart. Yes, everything lies in that!"

Ah! how Lecoq rejoiced that he had succeeded in having May transferred to another prison; for he was convinced that the accomplice had warned May of the attempt he was going to make with the old clothes-dealer on the very evening before May's removal to Mazas. Hence, it had not been possible to acquaint him with the failure of this scheme or the substitution of another.

Still following the chalk-marks, Lecoq now reached the Odéon theatre. Here were fresh signs, and what was more, Father Absinthe could be perceived under the colonnade, standing in front of one of the book-stalls, and apparently engrossed in the contemplation of a print.

Assuming the nonchalant manner of the loafer whose garb he wore, Lecoq took his stand beside his colleague. "Where is he?" asked the young detective.

"There," replied his companion, with a slight movement of his head in the direction of the steps.

The fugitive was, indeed, seated on one of the steps at the side of the theatre, his elbows resting on his knees, and his face hidden in his hands, as if he felt the necessity of concealing the expression of his face from the passers-by. Undoubtedly, at that moment, he gave himself up for lost. Alone, in the midst of Paris, without a penny, what was to become of him? He knew beyond the shadow of a doubt, that he was being watched; that his steps were being dogged, that the first attempt he made to inform his accomplice of his whereabouts would cost him his secret—the secret which he plainly held as more precious than life itself, and which, by immense sacrifices, he had so far been able to preserve.

Having for some short time contemplated in silence this unfortunate man whom after all he could but esteem and admire, Lecoq turned to his old companion. "What did he do on the way?" he asked.

"He went into the shops of five dealers in second-hand clothing without success. Then he addressed a man who was passing with a lot of old rubbish on his shoulder; but the man wouldn't even answer him."

Lecoq nodded his head thoughtfully. "The moral of this is, that there's a vast difference between theory and practice," he remarked. "Here's a fellow, who has made some most discerning men believe that he's only a poor devil, a low buffoon. Well, now he's free; and this so-called Bohemian doesn't even know how to go to work to sell the clothes on his back. The comedian who could play his part so well on the stage, has disappeared; while the man remains—the man who has always been rich, and knows nothing of the vicissitudes of life."

The young detective suddenly ceased moralising, for May had risen from his seat. Lecoq was only ten yards distant, and could see that his face was pallid. His attitude expressed profound dejection and one could read his indecision in his eyes. Perhaps he was wondering if it would not be best to

return and place himself again in the hands of his jailers, since he was without the resources upon which he had depended.

After a little, however, he shook off the torpor that had for a time overpowered him; his eyes brightened, and, with a gesture of defiance, he left the steps, crossed the open square and walked down the Rue de l'Ancienne-Comédie. He strode onward now with the brisk, determined step of a man who has a definite aim in view.

"Who knows where he is going now?" murmured Father Absinthe, as he trotted along by Lecoq's side.

"I do," replied the young detective. "And the proof is, that I am going to leave you, and run on in advance, to prepare for his reception. I may be mistaken, however, and as we must be prepared for any emergency, leave me the chalk-marks as you go along. If our man doesn't come to the Hôtel de Mariembourg, as I think he will, I shall come back here to start in pursuit of you again."

Just then an empty cab chanced to be passing, and Lecoq hastily got into it telling the driver to take him to the Northern Railway station by the shortest route, and as quickly as possible. As time was precious, he handed the cabman his fare while on the road, and then began to search his pocket-book among the various documents confided to him by M. Segmuller, for a particular paper he would now require.

Scarcely had the cab stopped at the corner of the Place de Roubaix than the young detective alighted and ran towards the Hôtel de Mariembourg where, as on the occasion of his first visit, he found Madame Milner standing on a chair in front of her bird cage, obstinately trying to teach her starling German, while the bird with equal obstinacy repeated: "Camille! where is Camille?"

On perceiving the individual of questionable mien, who had presumed to cross her threshold, the pretty widow did not deign to change her position.

"What do you want?" she asked in a curt, sharp voice.

"I am the nephew of a messenger at the Palais de Justice," replied Lecoq with an awkward bow, in perfect keeping with his attire. "On going to see my uncle this morning, I found him laid up with rheumatism; and he asked me to bring you this paper in his stead. It is a summons for you to appear at once before the investigating magistrate."

This reply induced Madame Milner to abandon her perch. "Very well," she replied after glancing at the summons; "give me time to throw a shawl over my shoulder and I'll start."

Lecoq withdrew with another awkward bow; but he had not reached the street before a significant grimace betrayed his inward satisfaction. She had duped him once, and now he had repaid her. On looking round him he perceived a half built house at the corner of the Rue St. Quentin, and being momentarily in want of a hiding place he concluded that he had best conceal himself there. The pretty widow had only asked for sufficient time to slip on a shawl before starting; but then it so happened that she was rather particular as to her personal appearance—and such a plump attractive little body as herself, having an eye perhaps to renewed wedlock, could not possibly be expected to tie her bonnet strings in less than a quarter of an hour. Hence, Lecoq's sojourn behind the scaffolding of the half built house, proved rather longer than he had expected, and at the thought that May might arrive at any moment, he fairly trembled with anxiety. How much was he in advance of the fugitive? Half-an-hour, perhaps! And he had accomplished only half his task.

At last, however, the coquettish landlady made her appearance as radiant as a spring morning. She probably wished to make up for the time she had spent over her toilet, for as she turned the corner she began to run. Lecoq waited till she was out of sight, and then bounding from his place of concealment, he burst into the Hôtel de Mariembourg like a bomb-shell.

Fritz, the Bavarian lad, must have been warned that the house was to be left in his sole charge for some hours; for having comfortably installed himself in his mistress's own particular arm-chair, with his legs resting on another one, he had already commenced to fall asleep.

"Wake up!" shouted Lecoq: "wake up!"

At the sound of this voice, which rang like a trumpet blast, Fritz sprang to his feet frightened half out of his wits.

"You see that I am an agent of the Préfecture of Police," said the visitor, showing his card. "Now, if you wish to avoid all sorts of disagreeable things, the least of which will be a sojourn in prison, you must obey me."

The boy trembled in every limb. "Yes mein Herr—Monsieur, I mean—I will obey you," he stammered. "But what am I to do?"

"Oh very little. A man is coming here in a moment; you will know him by his black clothes, and his long beard. You must answer him word for word, as I tell you. And remember, if you make any mistake, you will suffer for it."

"You may rely upon me, sir," replied Fritz. "I have an excellent memory."

The prospect of imprisonment had terrified him into abject submission. He spoke the truth; he would have been willing to say or do anything just then. Lecoq profited of this disposition; and then, clearly and concisely gave the lad his instructions. "And now," added he, "I must see and hear you. Where can I hide myself?"

Fritz pointed to a glass door. "In the dark room there, sir. By leaving the door ajar you can hear; and you can see everything through the glass."

Without another word Lecoq darted into the room in question. Not a moment too soon, however, for the spring-bell of the outer door announced the arrival of a visitor. It was May. "I wish to speak to the landlady," he said.

"What landlady?" replied the lad.

"The person who received me when I came here six weeks ago—"

"Oh, I understand," interrupted Fritz; "it's Madame Milner you want to see; but you've come too late; she sold the house about a month ago, and has gone back to Alsace."

May stamped his foot and uttered a terrible oath. "I have come to claim something from her," he insisted.

"Do you want me to call her successor?"

Concealed behind the glass door, Lecoq could not help admiring Fritz, who was uttering these glaring falsehoods with that air of perfect candour which gives the Germans such a vast advantage over the Latin races, who seem to be lying even when they are telling the truth.

"Her successor would order me off," exclaimed May. "I came to reclaim the money I paid for a room I never occupied."

"Such money is never refunded."

May muttered some incoherent threat, in which such words as "down-right robbery" and "justice" could be distinguished, and then abruptly walked back into the street, slamming the door behind him.

"Well! did I answer properly?" asked Fritz triumphantly, as Lecoq emerged from his hiding place.

"Yes, perfectly," replied the detective. And then pushing aside the boy, who was standing in his way, he dashed after May,

A vague fear almost suffocated him. It had struck him that the fugitive had not been either surprised or deeply affected by the news he had heard. He had come to the hotel depending upon Madame Milner's assistance and the news of this woman's departure would naturally have alarmed him, for was she not the mysterious accomplice's confidential friend? Had May then guessed the trick that had been played upon him? And if so, how! Lecoq's good sense told him plainly, that the fugitive must have been put on his guard and, on rejoining Father Absinthe, he immediately exclaimed. "May spoke to some one on his way to the hotel."

"Why, how could you know that?" exclaimed the worthy man, greatly astonished.

"Ah! I was sure of it! Who did he speak to?"

"To a very pretty woman, upon my word!—fair and plump as a partridge!"

"Ah! fate is against us!" exclaimed Lecoq with an oath. "I run on in advance to Madame Milner's house, so that May shan't see her. I invent an excuse to send her out of the hotel, and yet they meet each other."

Father Absinthe gave a despairing gesture. "Ah! if I had known!" he murmured: "but you did not tell me to prevent May from speaking to the passers-by."

"Never mind, my old friend, said Lecoq, consolingly; "it could'n't have been helped."

While this conversation was going on, the fugitive had reached the Faubourg Montmartre, and his pursuers were obliged to hasten forward and get closer to their man so that they might not lose him in the crowd.

"Now," resumed Lecoq when they had overtaken him, "give me the particulars. Where did they meet?"

"In the Rue-Saint-Quentin."

"Which saw the other first?"

"May."

"What did the woman say?" "Did you hear any cry of surprise!"

"I heard nothing, for I was quite fifty yards off; but by the woman's manner, I could see she was stupefied."

Ah! if Lecoq could have witnessed the scene, what valuable deductions he might have drawn from it. "Did they talk for a long time?" he asked.

"For less than a quarter of an hour."

"Do you know whether Madame Milner gave May money or not?"

"I can't say. They gesticulated like mad—so violently, indeed, that I thought they were quarrelling."

"They knew they were being watched, and were endeavouring to divert suspicion."

"If they would only arrest this woman and question her," suggested Father Absinthe.

"What good would it do? Hasn't M. Segmuller examined and cross-examined her a dozen times without drawing anything from her! Ah! she's a cunning one. She would declare that May met her and insisted that she should refund the ten francs he paid her for his room. We must do our best, however. If the accomplice has not been warned already, he will soon be told; so we must try to keep the two men apart. What

ruse they will employ, I can't divine. But I know that it will be nothing hackneyed."

Lecoq's presumptions made Father Absinthe nervous. "The surest way, perhaps, ventured the latter would be to lock him up again!"

"No!" replied the young detective. "I want his secret and I'll have it. What will be said of us, if we two allow this man to escape us? He can't be visible and invisible by turns, like the devil. We'll see what he is going to do now that he's got some money and a plan—for he has both at the present moment. I would stake my right hand upon it."

At that same instant, as if May intended to convince Lecoq of the truth of his suspicions, he entered a tobacconist's shop, and emerged an instant afterwards, with a cigar in his mouth.

XXI.

So the landlady of the Hôtel de Mariembourg had given May money. There could be no further doubt on that point after the purchase of this cigar. But had they agreed upon any plan? Had they had sufficient time to decide on the method that May was to employ with the view of baffling his pursuers?

It would seem so, since the fugitive's manner had now changed in more respects than one. If hitherto he had seemed to care little for the danger of pursuit and capture, at present he was evidently uneasy and agitated. After walking so long in the full sunlight, with his head high in the air, he now slunk along in the shadow of the houses, hiding himself as much as possible.

"It is evident that his fears have increased in proportion with his hopes," said Lecoq to his companion. "He was quite unnerved when we saw him at the Odéon and the merest trifle would have decided him to surrender; now, however, he thinks he has a chance to escape with his secret."

The fugitive was following the boulevards but suddenly he turned into a side street and made his way towards the Temple, where, soon afterwards, Father Absinthe and Lecoq found him conversing with one of those importunate dealers in cast off garments who consider every passer-by their lawful prey. The vendor and May were evidently debating a question of price; but the latter was plainly no skilful bargainer, for with a somewhat disappointed air, he soon gave up the discussion and entered the shop.

"Ah, so now he has some coin he has determined on a change of costume," remarked Lecoq. "Isn't that always an escaped prisoner's first impulse?"

Soon afterwards May emerged into the street. His appearance was decidedly changed; for he wore a pair of dark blue linen trousers, of the type French "navvies" habitually affect, and a loosely fitting coat of rough woollen material. A gay silk kerchief was knotted about his throat; and a black silk cap was set on one side of his head. Thus attired, he was scarcely more prepossessing in appearance than Lecoq; and one would have hesitated before deciding which of the two it would be preferable to meet at night on a deserted highway.

May seemed very well pleased with his transformation, and was evidently more at ease in his new attire. On leaving the shop, however, he glanced suspiciously around him, as if to ascertain which of the passers-by were watching his movements. He had not parted with his broadcloth suit, but

was carrying it under his arm, wrapped up in a handkerchief. The only thing he had left behind him was his tall chimney-pot hat.

Lecoq would have liked to enter the shop, and make some inquiries ; but he felt that it would be imprudent to do so, for May had settled his cap on his head with a gesture that left no doubt as to his intentions. A second later he turned into the Rue du Temple, and now the chase began in earnest ; for the fugitive proved as swift and agile as a stag, and it was no small task to keep him well in sight. He had no doubt lived in England and Germany, since he spoke the language of these countries like a native ; but one thing was certain—he knew Paris as thoroughly as the most expert Parisian.

This was shown by the way in which he dashed into the Rue des Gravelliers, and by the precision of his course through the many winding streets that lie between the Rue du Temple and the Rue Beaubourg. He seemed to know this quarter of the capital by heart ; as well, indeed, as if he had spent half his life there. He knew all the wine-shops communicating with two streets—all the by-ways, passages, and tortuous alleys. Twice he almost escaped his pursuers ; and once his salvation hung upon a thread. If he had remained in an obscure corner, where he was completely hidden, only an instant longer, the two detectives would have passed him by and his safety would have been assured,

The pursuit presented immense difficulties. Night was coming on, and with it that light fog which almost invariably accompanies a spring sun-set. Soon the street-lamps glimmered luridly in the mist, and then it required a keen eyesight indeed to see even for a moderate distance. And to add to this drawback, the streets were now thronged with workmen returning home after their daily toil, and with housewives intent on purchasing provisions for the evening meal ; while round about each dwelling there congregated its numerous denizens swarming like bees around a hive. May, moreover, took advantage of every opportunity to mislead the persons who might be following him. Groups collected around some cheap-jack's stall, street accidents, a block of vehicles—everything was utilized by him with such marvellous presence of mind that he often glided through the crowd without leaving any sign of his passage.

At last he left the neighbourhood of the Rue des Gravelliers and made for a broader street. Reaching the Boulevard de Sebastopol, he turned to the left, and took a fresh start. He darted on with marvellous rapidity with his elbows pressed close to his body—husbanding his breath, and timing his steps with the precision of a dancing master. Never pausing, and without once turning his head, he ever hurried on. And it was at the same regular but rapid pace that he covered the Boulevard de Sebastopol, crossed the Place du Châtelet, and proceeded to mount the Boulevard Saint-Michel.

Here he suddenly halted before a cab-stand. He spoke to one of the drivers, opened the door of his vehicle and jumped in. The cab started off at a rapid pace. But May was not inside. He had merely passed through the vehicle getting out at the other door, and just as the driver was departing for an imaginary destination May slipped into an adjacent cab which left the stand at a gallop. Perhaps, after so many ruses, after such formidable efforts after this last stratagem—perhaps May believed that he was free.

He was mistaken. Behind the cab which bore him onward, and whilst he leant back against the cushions to rest, a man was running ; and this man was Lecoq. Poor Father Absinthe had fallen by the way. In front of

the Palais de Justice he paused, exhausted and breathless, and Lecoq had little hope of seeing him again, since he had all he could do to keep his man in sight, without stopping to make the chalk-marks agreed upon.

May had instructed his driver to take him to the Place d'Italie: requesting him, moreover, to stop exactly in the middle of the square. This was about a hundred paces from the police-station in which he had been temporarily confined with the Widow Chupin. When the vehicle halted he sprang to the ground, and cast a rapid glance around him, as if looking for some dreaded shadow. He could see nothing; however, for although surprised by the sudden stoppage Lecoq had yet had time to fling himself flat on his stomach under the body of the cab regardless of all danger of being crushed by the wheels. May was apparently re-assured. He paid the cabman and then retraced his course towards the Rue Mouffetard.

With a bound, Lecoq was on his feet again, and started after the fugitive as eagerly as a ravenous dog might follow a bone. He had reached the shadow cast by the large trees in the outer boulevards, when a faint whistle resounded in his ears. "Father Absinthe!" he exclaimed, in a tone of delighted surprise.

"The same," replied the old detective, "and quite rested, thanks to a passing carman who picked me up and brought me here——"

"Oh, enough!" interrupted Lecoq. "Let us keep our eyes open."

May was now walking quite leisurely. He stopped first before one and then before another of the numerous wine-shops and eating houses that abound in this neighbourhood. He was apparently looking for someone or something, which of the two Lecoq could not of course divine. However, after peering through the glass doors of three of these establishments and then turning away, the fugitive at last entered the fourth. The two detectives, who were enabled to obtain a good view of the shop inside, saw the supposed murderer cross the room and seat himself at a table, where a man of unusually stalwart-build, ruddy-faced and grey-whiskered, was already seated.

"The accomplice!" murmured Father Absinthe.

Was this really the redoubtable accomplice? Under other circumstances Lecoq would have hesitated to place dependence on a vague similarity in personal appearance; but here probabilities were so strongly in favour of Father Absinthe's assertion that the young detective at once admitted its truth. Was not this meeting the logical sequence of May and Madame Milner's chance interview a few hours before?

"May," thought Lecoq, "began by taking all the money Madame Milner had about her; and then instructed her to tell his accomplice to come and wait for him in some cheap restaurant near here. If he hesitated and looked inside the different establishments, it was only because he hadn't been able to specify any particular one. Now, if they don't throw aside the mask, it will be because May is not sure he has eluded pursuit, and because the accomplice fears that Madame Milner may have been followed."

The accomplice, if this new personage was really the accomplice, had resorted to a disguise not unlike that which May and Lecoq had both adopted. He wore a dirty blue blouse, and a hideous old slouch hat, which was well-nigh in tatters. He had, in fact, rather exaggerated his make-up, for his sinister physiognomy attracted especial attention even beside the depraved and ferocious faces of the other customers in the shop. For this low eating house was a regular den of thieves and cut-throats. Among those present, there were not four workmen really worthy of that name.

The others occupied in eating and drinking there, were all more or less familiar with prison life. The least to be dreaded were the *barrière* loafers easily recognized by their glazed caps and their loosely-knotted neckerchiefs. The majority of the company appeared to consist of this class.

And yet May, that man who was so strongly suspected of belonging to the highest social sphere, seemed to be perfectly at home. He called for the regular "ordinary" and a "chopine" of wine, and then, after gulping down his soup, bolted great pieces of beef, pausing every now and then to wipe his mouth on the back of his sleeve. But was he conversing with his neighbour? This it was impossible to discern through the glass door, all obscured by smoke and steam.

"I must go in," said Lecoq, resolutely. "I must get a place near them, and listen."

"Don't think of such a thing," said Father Absinthe. "What if they recognized you!"

"They won't recognize me."

"If they do, they'll kill you."

Lecoq made a careless gesture.

"I certainly think that they wouldn't hesitate to rid themselves of me at any cost. But, nonsense! A detective who is afraid to risk his life is no better than a low spy. Why! you never saw even *Gévrol* flinch."

Perhaps Father Absinthe had wished to ascertain if his companion's courage was equal to his shrewdness and sagacity. If such were the case he was satisfied on this score now.

"You, my friend, will remain here to follow them if they leave hurriedly," resumed Lecoq, who in the meanwhile had already turned the handle of the door. Entering with a careless air and taking a seat at a table near that occupied by the fugitive and the man in the slouched hat, he called for a plate of meat and a chopine of wine in a guttural voice.

The fugitive and the ruffian opposite him *were* talking, but like strangers who had met by chance, and not at all after the fashion of friends who have met at a rendezvous. They spoke in the jargon of their pretended rank in life, not that puerile slang met with in romances descriptive of low life, but that obscene vulgar dialect which it is impossible to render, so changeable and diverse is the signification of its words.

"What wonderful actors!" thought Lecoq; "what perfection! what method! How I should be deceived if I were not absolutely certain!"

For the moment the man in the slouch hat was giving a detailed account of the different prisons in France. He described the governors of the principal houses of detention; explained the divergencies of discipline in different establishments; and recounted that the food at Poissy was ten times better than that at Fontevault.

Lecoq, having finished his repast, ordered a small glass of brandy, and, leaning his back against the wall and closing his eyes, pretended to fall asleep. His ears were wide open however, and he carefully listened to the conversation.

Soon May began talking in his turn; and he narrated his story exactly as he had related it to the magistrate, from the murder up to his escape, without forgetting to mention the suspicions attached to his identity—suspicions which had afforded him great amusement, he said. He added that he would be perfectly happy if he had money enough to take him back to Germany; but unfortunately he only had a few sous and didn't know where or how to procure any more. He had not even succeeded in selling

some clothing which belonged to him, and which he had with him in a bundle.

At these words the man in the tattered felt hat declared that he had too good a heart to leave a comrade in such embarrassment. He knew, in the very same street, an obliging dealer in such articles, and he offered to take May to his place at once. May's only response was to rise, saying, "Let us start." And they did start, with Lecoq still at their heels.

They walked rapidly on until passing the Rue Fer-à-Moulin when they turned into a narrow dimly-lighted alley, and entered a dingy dwelling.

"Run and ask the concierge if there are not two doors by which any one can leave this house," said Lecoq, addressing Father Absinthe.

The latter instantly obeyed. He learnt, however, that the house had only one street door, and accordingly the two detectives waited. "We are discovered!" murmured Lecoq. "I am sure of it. May must have recognized me, or the boy at the Hôtel de Mariembourg has described me to the accomplice."

Father Absinthe made no response, for just then the two men came out of the house. May was jingling some coins in his hand, and seemed to be in a very bad temper. "What infernal rascals these receivers are!" he grumbled.

However, although he had only received a small sum for his clothing, he probably felt that his companion's kindness deserved some reward; for immediately afterwards he proposed they should take a drink together, and with that object in view they entered a wine-shop close by. They remained here for more than an hour, drinking together; and only left this establishment to enter one a hundred paces distant. Turned out by the landlord, who was anxious to shut up, the two friends now took refuge in the next one they found open. Here again they were soon turned out and then they hurried to another boozing-den—and yet again to a fifth. And so, after drinking innumerable bottles of wine, they contrived to reach the Place Saint-Michel, at about one o'clock in the morning. Here, however, they found nothing to drink; for all the wine-shops were closed.

The two men then held a consultation together, and, after a short discussion, they walked arm-in-arm towards the Faubourg Saint-Germain, like a pair of friends. The liquor they had imbibed was seemingly producing its effect, for they often staggered in their walk, and talked not merely loudly but both at the same time. In spite of the danger, Lecoq advanced near enough to catch some fragments of their conversation; and the words "a good stroke," and "money enough to satisfy one," reached his ears.

Father Absinthe's confidence wavered. "All this will end badly," he murmured.

"Don't be alarmed," replied his friend. "I frankly confess that I don't understand the manoeuvres of these wily confederates, but what does that matter after all; now the two men are together, I feel sure of success—sure. If one runs away, the other will remain, and Gévrol shall soon see which is right, he or I."

Meanwhile the two drunkards had slackened their pace. By the manner in which they examined the magnificent mansions of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, one might have suspected them of the very worst intentions. In the Rue de Varrennes, at only a few steps from the Rue de la Chaise, they suddenly paused before a wall of moderate height surrounding an immense garden. The man in the slouch hat now did the talking, and explained to

May—as the detectives could tell by his gestures—that the mansion to which this garden belonged had its front entrance in the Rue de Grenelle.

“Bah !” growled Lecoq, “how much farther will they carry this nonsense ?”

They carried it farther than the young detective had ever imagined. May suddenly sprang on to his companion’s shoulders, and raised himself to a level with the summit of the wall. An instant afterwards a heavy thud might have been heard. He had let himself drop into the garden. The man in the slouch hat remained in the street to watch.

The enigmatical fugitive had accomplished this strange, inconceivable design so swiftly that Lecoq had neither the time nor the desire to oppose him. His amazement at this unexpected misfortune was so great that for an instant he could neither think nor move. But he quickly regained his self-possession, and at once decided what was to be done. With a sure eye he measured the distance separating him from May’s accomplice, and with three bounds he was upon him. The man in the slouched hat attempted to shout, but an iron hand stifled the cry in his throat. He tried to escape, and to beat off his assailant, but a vigorous kick stretched him on the ground as if he had been a child. Before he had time to think of further resistance he was bound, gagged, and carried, half-suffocated, to the corner of the Rue de la Chaise. No sound had been heard ; not a word, not an ejaculation, not even a noise of scuffling—nothing. Any suspicious sound might have reached May, on the other side of the wall, and warned him of what was going on.

“How strange,” murmured Father Absinthe, too much amazed to lend a helping hand to his younger colleague. “How strange ! Who would have supposed—”

“Enough ! Enough !” interrupted Lecoq, in that harsh, imperious voice, which imminent peril always gives to energetic men. “Enough !—we will talk to-morrow. I must run away for a minute, and you will remain here. If May shows himself, capture him ; don’t allow him to escape.”

“I understand ; but what is to be done with the man who is lying there ?”

“Leave him where he is. I have bound him securely, so there is nothing to fear. When the night-police pass, we will give him into charge—”

He paused and listened. A short way down the street, heavy, measured footsteps could be heard approaching.

“There they come,” said Father Absinthe.

“Ah ! I dared not hope it ! I shall have a good chance now.”

At the same moment, two sergeants de ville, whose attention had been attracted by this group at the street corner, hastened towards them. In a few words, Lecoq explained the situation, and it was decided that one of the sergeants should take the accomplice to the station-house, while the other remained with Father Absinthe to cut off May’s retreat.

“And now,” said Lecoq, “I will run round to the Rue de Grenelle and give the alarm. To whose house does this garden belong ?”

“What !” replied one of the sergeants in surprise, “don’t you know the gardens of the Duke de Sairmeuse, the famous duke who is a millionaire ten times over, and who was formally the friend—”

“Ah yes, I know, I know !” said Lecoq.

“The thief” resumed the sergeant “walked into a pretty trap when he got over that wall. There was a reception at the mansion this evening as there is every Monday and every one in the house is still up. The guests

are only just leaving for there were five or six carriages still at the door as we passed by."

Lecoq darted off extremely troubled by what he had just heard. It now seemed to him, that if May had got into this garden, it was not for the purpose of committing a robbery, but in the hope of throwing his pursuers off the track, and making his escape by way of the Rue de Grenelle, which he hoped to do unnoticed, in the bustle and confusion attending the departure of the guests.

On reaching the Hôtel de Sairmeuse, a princely dwelling the long façade of which was brilliantly illuminated, Lecoq found a last carriage just coming from the court-yard, while several footmen were extinguishing the lights, and an imposing "Suisse," dazzling to behold in his gorgeous livery, prepared to close the heavy double doors of the grand entrance.

The young detective advanced towards this important personage, "Is this the Hôtel de Sairmeuse?" he inquired.

The Suisse suspended his work to survey the audacious vagabond who ventured to question him and then in a harsh voice replied—"I advise you to pass on. I want none of your jesting."

Lecoq had forgotten that he was clad as a *barrière* loafer, "Ah" he rejoined "I'm not what I seem to be. I'm an agent of the secret-service; by name Lecoq. Here is my card, and I came to tell you that an escaped criminal has just scaled the garden wall in the rear of the Hôtel de Sairmeuse."

"A crim-in-al?"

The young detective thought a little exaggeration could do no harm, and might perhaps ensure him more ready aid. "Yes," he replied; "and one of the most dangerous kind—a murderer who has the blood of three victims already on his hands. We have just arrested his accomplice, who helped him over the wall."

The flunkey's ruby nose paled perceptibly. "I will summon the servants," he faltered, and suiting the action to the word, he was raising his hand to the bell-chain, employed to announce the arrival of visitors, when Lecoq hastily stopped him.

"A word first!" said he. "Might not the fugitive have passed through the house and escaped by this door, without being seen? In that case he would be far away by this time."

"Impossible!"

"But why?"

"Excuse me, but I know what I'm saying. First, the door opening into the garden is closed; it is only open during grand receptions, not for our ordinary Monday drawing-rooms. Secondly, Monseigneur requires me to stand on the threshold of the street door when he is receiving. To-day he repeated this order, and you may be sure that I haven't disobeyed him."

"Since that's the case," said Lecoq, slightly re-assured, we shall perhaps succeed in finding our man. Warn the servants, but without ringing the bell. The less noise we make, the greater will be our chance of success."

In a moment the fifty servants who peopled the ante-rooms, stables, and kitchens of the Hôtel de Sairmeuse were gathered together. The great lanterns in the coach-houses and stables were lighted, and the entire garden was illuminated as by enchantment.

"If May is concealed here," thought Lecoq, delighted to see so many auxiliaries, "it will be impossible for him to escape."

But it was in vain that the gardens were thoroughly explored over-and-

over again ; no one could be found. The sheds where the gardening tools were kept, the conservatories, the summer-houses, the two rustic pavilions at the foot of the garden, even the dog-kennels, were scrupulously visited, but all in vain. The trees, with the exception of some horse-chestnuts at the rear of the garden, were almost destitute of leaves, but they were not neglected on that account. An agile boy, armed with a lantern, climbed each tree, and explored even the topmost branches.

"The murderer must have left by the way he came," obstinately repeated the Suisse who had armed himself with a huge pistol, and who would not let go his hold on Lecoq, fearing an accident perhaps.

To convince the Suisse of his error it was necessary for the young detective to place himself in communication with Father Absinthe and the sergeant de ville on the other side of the wall. As Lecoq had expected, the latter both replied that they had not once taken their eyes off the wall, and that not even a mouse had crossed into the street.

The exploration had hitherto been conducted after a somewhat haphazard fashion, each of the servants obeying his own inspiration ; but the necessity of a methodically conducted search was now recognized. Accordingly, Lecoq took such measures that not a corner, not a recess, could possibly escape scrutiny ; and he was dividing the task between his willing assistants, when a new-comer appeared upon the scene. This was a grave, smooth-faced individual in the attire of a notary.

"Monsieur Otto, Monseigneur's first valet de chambre," the Suisse murmured in Lecoq's ear.

This important personage came on behalf of Monsieur le Duc (*he* did not say "Monseigneur") to inquire the meaning of all this uproar. When he had received an explanation, M. Otto condescended to compliment Lecoq on his efficiency, and to recommend that the house should be searched from garret to cellar. These precautions alone would allay the fears of Madame la Duchesse.

He then departed ; and the search began again with renewed ardour. A mouse concealed in the gardens of the Hôtel de Sairmeuse could not have escaped discovery, so minute were the investigations. Not a single object of any size was left undisturbed. The trees were examined leaf-by-leaf, one might almost say. Occasionally the discouraged servants proposed to abandon the search ; but Lecoq urged them on. He ran from one to the other, entreating and threatening by turns, swearing that he asked only one more effort, and that this effort would assuredly be crowned with success. Vain promises ! The fugitive could not be found.

The evidence was now conclusive. To persist in searching the garden any longer would be worse than folly. Accordingly, the young detective decided to recall his auxiliaries. "That's enough," he said, in a despondent voice. "It is now certain that the criminal is no longer in the garden."

Was he cowering in some corner of the great house, white with fear, and trembling at the noise made by his pursuers ? One might reasonably suppose this to be the case ; and such was the opinion of the servants. Above all, such was the opinion of the Suisse who renewed with growing assurance his affirmations of a few moments before.

"I have not moved from the threshold of the house to-night," he said, "and I should certainly have seen any person who passed out."

"Let us go into the house, then," said Lecoq. "But first let me ask my companion, who is waiting for me in the street, to join me. It is unnecessary for him to remain any longer where he is."

When Father Absinthe had responded to the summons all the lower doors were carefully closed and guarded, and the search recommenced inside the house, one of the largest and most magnificent residences of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. But at this moment all the treasures of the universe could not have won a single glance or a second's attention from Lecoq. All his thoughts—were occupied with the fugitive. He passed through several superb drawing-rooms, along an unrivalled picture gallery, across a magnificent dining-room, with sideboards groaning beneath their load of massive plate, without paying the slightest attention to the marvels of art and upholstery that were offered to his view. He hurried on accompanied by the servants who were guiding and lighting him. He lifted heavy articles of furniture as easily as he would have lifted a feather; he moved each chair and sofa from its place, he explored each cupboard and wardrobe, and drew back in turns all the wall-hangings, window-curtains, and *portières*. A more complete search would have been impossible. In each of the rooms and passages that Lecoq entered not a nook was left unexplored, not a corner was forgotten. At length, after two hours continuous work, Lecoq returned to the first floor. Only five or six servants had accompanied him on his tour of inspection. The others had dropped off one by one, weary of this adventure, which had at first possessed the attractions of a pleasure party.

"You have seen everything, gentleman," declared an old footman.

"Everything!" interrupted the Suisse, "everything! Certainly not. There are the private apartments of Monseigneur and those of Madame la Duchesse still to be explored."

"Alas!" murmured Lecoq, "What good would it be?"

But the Suisse had already gone to rap gently at one of the doors opening into the hall. His interest equalled that of the detectives. They had seen the murderer enter; he had not seen him go out; therefore the man was in the house and he wished him to be found.

The door at which he had knocked soon opened, and the grave, clean-shaven face of Otto, the duke's first valet de chambre, showed itself. "What the deuce do you want?" he asked in surly tones.

"To enter Monseigneur's room," replied the Suisse "in order to see if the fugitive has not taken refuge there."

"Are you crazy?" exclaimed the head valet de chambre. "How could any one have entered here? Besides, I can't suffer Monsieur le Duc to be disturbed. He has been at work all night, and he is just going to take a bath before going to bed."

The Suisse seemed very vexed at this rebuff; and Lecoq was presenting his excuses, when another voice was heard exclaiming. "Let these worthy men do their duty, Otto."

"Ah! do you hear that!" exclaimed the Suisse triumphantly.

"Very well, since Monsieur le Duc permits it. Come in, I will light you through the apartments."

Lecoq entered, but it was only for form's sake that he walked through the different apartments; a library, an admirable study and a charming smoking-room. As he was passing through the bed-chamber, he had the honour of seeing the Duke de Sairmeuse through the half-open door of a small, white, marble bath-room.

"Ah, well!" cried the duke, affably, "is the fugitive still invisible?"

"Still invisible, monsieur," Lecoq respectfully replied.

The valet de chambre did not share his master's good humour. "I think,

gentlemen," said he, "that you may spare yourselves the trouble of visiting the apartments of the duchess. It is a duty we have taken upon ourselves—the women and I—and we have looked even in the bureau drawers."

Upon the landing the old footman, who had not ventured to enter his master's apartments, was awaiting the detectives. He had doubtless received his orders, for he politely inquired if they desired anything, and if, after such a fatiguing night, they would not find some cold meat and a glass of wine acceptable. Father Absinthe's eyes sparkled. He probably thought that in this *quasi*-royal abode they must have delicious things to eat and drink—such viands, indeed, as he had never tasted in his life. But Lecoq civilly refused, and left the Hôtel de Sairmeuse, reluctantly followed by his old companion.

He was eager to be alone. For several hours he had been making immense efforts to conceal his rage and despair. May escaped! vanished! evaporated! The thought drove him almost mad. What he had declared to be impossible had nevertheless occurred. In his confidence and pride, he had sworn to answer for the prisoner's head with his own life; and yet he had allowed him to slip between his fingers.

When he was once more in the street, he paused in front of Father Absinthe, and crossing his arms, inquired: "Well, my friend, what do you think of all this?"

The old detective shook his head, and in serene unconsciousness of his want of tact, responded: "I think that Gévrol will chuckle with delight."

At this mention of his most cruel enemy, Lecoq bounded from the ground like a wounded bull. "Oh!" he exclaimed. "Gévrol has not won the battle yet. We have lost May; it is a great misfortune: but his accomplice remains in our hands. We hold the crafty man who has hitherto defeated all our plans, no matter how carefully arranged. He is certainly shrewd and devoted to his friend; but we will see if his devotion will withstand the prospect of hard labour in the penitentiary. And that is what awaits him, if he is silent, and if he thus accepts the responsibility of aiding and abetting the fugitive's escape. Oh! I've no fears—M. Segmuller will know how to draw the truth out of him."

So speaking, Lecoq brandished his clenched fist with a threatening air and then, in calmer tones, he added: "But we must go to the station-house where the accomplice was removed. I wish to question him a little."

XXII.

It was six o'clock, and the dawn was just breaking when Father Absinthe and his companion reached the station-house, where they found the superintendent seated at a small table, making out his report. He did not move when they entered, failing to recognize them under their disguises. But when they had mentioned their names, he rose with evident cordiality, and held out his hand.

"Upon my word!" said he, "I congratulate you on your capture last night."

Father Absinthe and Lecoq exchanged an anxious look. "What capture?" they both asked in a breath.

"Why, that individual you sent me last night so carefully bound."

"Well, what about him?"

The superintendent burst into a hearty laugh. "So you are ignorant of

your good fortune," said he. "Ah! luck has favoured you, and you will receive a handsome reward."

"Pray tell us what we've captured?" asked Father Absinthe, impatiently.

"A scoundrel of the deepest dye, an escaped convict, who has been missing for three months. You must have a description of him in your pocket—Joseph Couturier, in short."

On hearing these words, Lecoq became so frightfully pale that Father Absinthe, fearing he was going to faint, raised his arms to prevent his falling. A chair stood close by, however, and on this Lecoq allowed himself to drop: "Joseph Couturier," he faltered, evidently unconscious of what he was saying. "Joseph Couturier! an escaped convict!"

The superintendent certainly did not understand Lecoq's agitation, any better than he understood Father Absinthe's discomfited air.

"You have reason to be proud of your work; your success will make a sensation this morning," he repeated. "You have captured a famous prize. I can see Gévrol's nose now, when he hears the news. Only yesterday he was boasting that he alone was capable of securing this dangerous rascal."

After such an irreparable failure as that which had overtaken Lecoq, the unintended irony of these compliments was bitter in the extreme. The superintendent's words of praise fell on his ears like so many blows from a sledge hammer.

"You must be mistaken," he eventually remarked, rising from his seat and summoning all his energy to his assistance. "That man is not Couturier."

"Oh, I'm not mistaken; you may be quite sure of that. He fully answers the description appended to the circular ordering his capture, and even the little finger of his left hand is lacking, as is mentioned."

"Ah! that's a proof indeed!" groaned Father Absinthe.

"It is indeed. And I know another one more conclusive still. Couturier is an old acquaintance of mine. I have had him in custody before; and he recognized me last night just as I recognized him."

After this, further argument was impossible; hence it was in an entirely different tone that Lecoq remarked: "At least, my friend, you will allow me to address a few questions to your prisoner."

"Oh! as many as you like. But first of all, let us bar the door and place two of my men before it. This Couturier has a fondness for the open air, and he wouldn't hesitate to dash out our brains if he only saw a chance of escape."

After taking these precautions, the man was removed from the cage in which he had been confined. He stepped forward with a smile on his face, having already recovered that nonchalant manner common to old offenders who, when in custody, seem to lose all feeling of anger against the police. They are not unlike these gamblers who, after losing their last half-penny, nevertheless willingly shake hands with their adversary.

Couturier at once recognized Lecoq. "Ah!" said he, "it was you who did that business last night. You can boast of having a solid fist! You fell upon me very unexpectedly; and the back of my neck is still the worse for your clutch."

"Then, if I were to ask a favour of you, you wouldn't be disposed to grant it?"

"Oh, yes! all the same. I have no more malice in my composition than a chicken; and I rather like your face. What do you want of me."

"I should like to have some information about the man who accompanied you last night."

Couturier's face darkened. "I am really unable to give you any," he replied.

"Why?"

"Because I don't know him. I never saw him before last night."

"It's hard to believe that. A fellow doesn't enlist the first-comer, for an expedition like yours last evening. Before undertaking such a job with a man, one finds out something about him."

"I don't say I haven't been guilty of a stupid blunder," replied Couturier. "Indeed I could murder myself for it, but there was nothing about the man to make me suspect that he belonged to the secret-service. He spread a net for me, and I jumped into it. It was made for me, of course; but it wasn't necessary for me to put my foot into it."

"You are mistaken, my man," said Lecoq. "The individual in question didn't belong to the police force. I pledge you my word of honour, he didn't."

For a moment Couturier surveyed Lecoq with a knowing air, as if he hoped to discover whether he were speaking the truth or attempting to deceive him. "I believe you," he said at last. And to prove it I'll tell you how it all happened. I was dining alone last evening in a restaurant in the Rue Mouffetard, when that man came in and took a seat beside me. Naturally we began to talk; and I thought him a very good sort of fellow. I forget how it began, but somehow or other he mentioned that he had some clothes he wanted to sell; and being glad to oblige him, I took him to a friend, who bought them from him. It was doing him a good turn, wasn't it? Well, he offered me something to drink, and I returned the compliment. We had a number of glasses together, and by midnight I began to see double. He then began to propose a plan, which, he swore would make us both rich. It was to steal the plate from a superb mansion. There would be no risk for me; he would take charge of the whole affair. I had only to help him over the wall, and keep watch. The proposal was tempting—was it not? You would have thought so, if you had been in my place, and yet I hesitated. But the fellow insisted. He swore that he was acquainted with the habits of the house; that Monday evening was a grand gala night there, and that on these occasions the servants didn't lock up the plate. After a little while I consented."

A fleeting flush tinged Lecoq's pale cheeks. "Are you sure he told you that the Duke de Sairmeuse received every Monday evening?" he asked, eagerly.

"Certainly; how else could I have known it! He even mentioned the name you uttered just now, a name ending in 'euse.'"

A strange thought had just flitted through Lecoq's mind. "What if May and the Duke de Sairmeuse should be one and the same person?" But the notion seemed so thoroughly absurd, so utterly inadmissible that he quickly dismissed it, despising himself even for having entertained it for a single instant. He cursed his inveterate inclination always to look at events from a romantic impossible side, instead of considering them as natural common-place incidents. After all there was nothing surprising in the fact that a man of the world, such as he supposed May to be, should know the day set aside by the Duke de Sairmeuse for the reception of his friends.

The young detective had nothing more to expect from Couturier. He thanked him, and after shaking hands with the superintendent, walked

away, leaning on Father Absinthe's arm. For he really had need of support. His legs trembled, his head whirled, and he felt sick both in body and in mind. He had failed miserably, disgracefully. He had flattered himself that he possessed a genius for his calling, and yet he had been easily outwitted. To rid himself of pursuit, May had only had to invent a pretended accomplice, and this simple stratagem had sufficed to nonplus those who were on his trail.

Father Absinthe was rendered uneasy by his colleague's evident dejection. "Where are we going?" he enquired; "to the Palais de Justice, or to the Préfecture de Police?"

Lecoq shuddered on hearing this question, which brought him face to face with the horrible reality of his situation. "To the Préfecture!" he responded. "Why should I go there? To expose myself to Gévrol's insults, perhaps! I haven't courage enough for that. Nor do I feel that I have strength to go to M. Segmuller and say: 'Forgive me; you have judged me too favourably. I am a fool!'"

"What are we to do!"

"Ah! I don't know. Perhaps I shall embark for America—perhaps I shall throw myself into the river."

He had walked about a hundred yards when suddenly he stopped short. "No!" he exclaimed, with a furious stamp of his foot. "No, this affair shan't end like this. I have sworn to have the solution of the enigma—and I will have it!" For a moment he reflected; then, in a calmer voice, he added: "There is one man who can save us, a man who will see what I haven't been able to discern, who will understand things that I couldn't. Let us go and ask his advice, my course will depend on his reply—come!"

After such a day and such a night, it might have been expected that these two men would have felt an irresistible desire to sleep and rest. But Lecoq was sustained by wounded vanity, intense disappointment, and a yet unextinguished hope of revenge: while poor Father Absinthe was not unlike some luckless cab-horse, which, having forgotten there is such a thing as repose, is no longer conscious of fatigue, but travels on until he falls down dead. The old detective felt that his limbs were failing him; but Lecoq said: "It is necessary," and so he walked on.

They both went to Lecoq's lodgings, where they laid aside their disguises and made themselves trim. Then after breakfasting they hastily betook themselves to the Rue St. Lazare, where entering one of the most stylish houses in the street, Lecoq enquired of the concierge, "Is M. Tabaret at home?"

"Yes, but he's ill," was the reply.

"Very ill?" asked Lecoq anxiously.

"It is hard to tell," replied the man; "it is his old complaint—gout." And with an air of hypocritical commiseration, he added: "M. Tabaret is not wise to lead the life he does. Women are all very well in a way, but at his age——"

The two detectives exchanged a meaning glance, and as soon as they were out of hearing burst out laughing. Their hilarity had scarcely ceased when they reached the first floor, and rang the bell at the door of one of the apartments. The buxom-looking woman who appeared in answer to this summons, informed them that her master would receive them, although he was confined to his bed. "However, the doctor is with him now," she added. "But perhaps the gentlemen would not mind waiting until he has gone?" The gentlemen replying in the affirmative, she then conducted them into a handsome library, and invited them to sit down.

The person whom Lecoq had come to consult was a man celebrated for wonderful shrewdness and penetration, well-nigh exceeding the bounds of possibility. For five-and-forty-years he had held a petty post in one of the offices of the Mont de Piété, just managing to exist upon the meagre stipend he received. Suddenly enriched by the death of a relative, of whom he had scarcely ever heard, he immediately resigned his functions, and the very next day began to long for the same employment he had so often anathematized. In his endeavours to divert his mind, he began to collect old books, and heaped up mountains of tattered worm-eaten volumes in immense oak bookcases. But despite this pastime to many so attractive, he could not shake off his weariness. He grew thin and yellow, and his income of forty thousand francs, was literally killing him, when a sudden inspiration came to his relief. It came to him one evening after reading the memoirs of a celebrated detective, one of those men of subtle penetration, soft as silk, and supple as steel, whom justice sometimes sets upon the trail of crime.

"And I also am a detective!" he exclaimed.

This, however, he must prove. From that day forward he perused with feverish interest every book he could find that had any connection with the organisation of the police service, and the investigation of crime. Reports and pamphlets, letters and memoirs, he eagerly turned from one to the other, in his desire to master his subject. Such learning as he might find in books, did not suffice, however, to perfect his education. Hence, whenever a crime came to his knowledge he started out in quest of the particulars and worked up the case by himself.

Soon these platonic investigations did not suffice, and one evening, at dusk, he summoned all his resolution, and, going on foot to the Préfecture de Police, humbly begged employment from the officials there. He was not very favourably received, for applicants are numerous. But he pleaded his cause so adroitly that at last he was charged with some trifling commissions. He performed them admirably. The great difficulty was then overcome. Other matters were entrusted to him, and he soon displayed a wonderful aptitude for his chosen work.

The case of Madame B——, the rich banker's wife, made him virtually famous. Consulted at a moment when the police had abandoned all hope of solving the mystery, he proved by A plus B—by a mathematical deduction, so to speak—that the dear lady must have stolen her own property; and events soon proved that he had told the truth. After this success he was always called upon to advise in obscure and difficult cases.

It would be difficult to tell his exact *status* at the Préfecture. When a person is employed, salary or compensation of some kind is understood; but this strange man had never consented to receive a penny. What he did he did for his own pleasure—for the gratification of a passion which had become his very life. When the funds allowed him for expenses seemed insufficient, he at once opened his private purse; and the men who worked with him never went away without some substantial token of his liberality. Of course, such a man had many enemies. He did as much work—and far better work than any two inspectors of police; and he didn't receive a sou of salary. Hence, in calling him "spoil-trade," his rivals were not far from right.

Whenever anyone ventured to mention his name favourably in Gévrol's presence, the jealous inspector could scarcely control himself, and retorted by denouncing an unfortunate mistake which this remarkable man once made. Inclined to obstinacy, like all enthusiastic men, he had indeed

once effected the conviction of an innocent prisoner—a poor little tailor, who was accused of killing his wife. This single error (a grievous one no doubt) in a career of some duration, had the effect of cooling his ardour perceptibly; and subsequently, he seldom visited the Préfecture. But yet he remained “the oracle,” after the fashion of those great advocates who, tired of practice at the bar, still win great and glorious triumphs in their consulting rooms, lending to others the weapons they no longer care to wield themselves.

When the authorities were undecided what course to pursue in some great case, they invariably said: “Let us go and consult Tiraclair.” For this was the name by which he was most generally known: a sobriquet derived from a phrase, which was always on his lips. He was constantly saying: “Il faut que cela se tire au clair—That must be brought to light.” Hence, the not altogether inappropriate appellation of “Père Tiraclair,” or “Father Bring-to-Light.”

Perhaps this sobriquet assisted him in keeping his occupation secret from his friends among the general public. At all events they never suspected them. His disturbed life when he was working up a case, the strange visitors he received, his frequent and prolonged absences from home, were all imputed to a very unseasonable inclination to gallantry. His concierge was deceived as well as his friends, and laughing at his supposed infatuation, disrespectfully called him an old libertine. It was only the officials of the detective force who knew that Tiraclair and Tabaret were one and the same person.

Lecoq was trying to gain hope and courage by reflecting on the career of this eccentric man, when the buxom housekeeper re-entered the library and announced that the physician had left. At the same time she opened a door and exclaimed: “This is the room; you gentlemen can enter now.”

XXIII.

On a large canopied bed, sweating and panting beneath the weight of numerous blankets, lay the two-faced oracle—Tiraclair, of the Préfecture—Tabaret, of the Rue Saint Lazare. It was impossible to believe that the owner of such a face, in which a look of stupidity was mingled with one of perpetual astonishment, could possess superior talent, or even an average amount of intelligence. With his retreating forehead, and his immense ears, his odious turn-up nose, tiny eyes, and coarse, thick lips, M. Tabaret seemed an excellent type of the ignorant, penny-wise, petty *rentier* class. Whenever he took his walks abroad, the juvenile street Arabs would impudently shout after him or try to mimic his favourite grimace. And yet his ungainliness did not seem to worry him in the least, while he appeared to take real pleasure in increasing his appearance of stupidity, solacing himself with the reflection that “he is not really a genius who seems to be one.”

At the sight of the two detectives, whom he knew very well, his eyes sparkled with pleasure. “Good morning, Lecoq, my boy,” said he. “Good-morning, my old Absinthe. So you think enough down there of poor Papa Tiraclair to come and see him?”

“We need your advice, Monsieur Tabaret.”

“Ah, ha!”

“We have just been as completely outwitted as if we were babies in long clothes.”

"What! was your man such a very cunning fellow?"

Lecoq heaved a sigh. "So cunning," he replied, "that, if I were superstitious, I should say he was the devil himself."

The sick man's face wore a comical expression of envy. "What! you have found a treasure like that," said he, "and you complain! Why, it is a magnificent opportunity—a chance to be proud of! You see, my boys, everything has degenerated in these days. The race of great criminals is dying out—those who've succeeded the old stock are like counterfeit coins. There's scarcely anything left outside a crowd of low offenders who are not worth the shoe leather expended in pursuing them. It is enough to disgust a detective, upon my word. No more trouble, emotion, anxiety, or excitement. When a crime is committed now-a-days, the criminal is in jail the next morning, you've only to take the omnibus, and go to the culprit's house and arrest him. He's always found, the more the pity. But what has your fellow been up to?"

"He has killed three men."

"Oh! oh! oh!" said old Tabaret, in three different tones, plainly implying that this criminal was evidently superior to others of his species. "And where did this happen?"

"In a wine-shop near the barrière."

"Oh, yes, I recollect; a man named May. The murders were committed in the Widow Chupin's cabin. I saw the case mentioned in the *Gazette des Tribunaux*, and your comrade, Fanferlot l'Ecureuil, who comes to see me, told me you were strangely puzzled about the prisoner's identity. So you are charged with investigating the affair? So much the better. Tell me all about it, and I will assist you as well as I can."

Suddenly checking himself, and lowering his voice, Tiraucclair added: "But first of all, just do me the favour to get up. Now, wait a moment, and when I motion you, open that door there, on the left, very suddenly. Mariette, my housekeeper, who is curiosity incarnate is standing there listening. I hear her hair rubbing against the lock. Now!"

The young detective immediately obeyed, and Mariette, caught in the act, hastened away, pursued by her master's sarcasms. "You might have known that you couldn't succeed at that!" he shouted after her.

Although Lecoq and Father Absinthe were much nearer the door than old Tiraucclair, neither of them had heard the slightest sound; and they looked at each other in astonishment, wondering whether their host had been playing a little farce for their benefit, or whether his sense of hearing was really so acute as this incident would seem to indicate.

"Now," said Tabaret, settling himself more comfortably upon his pillows—"now I will listen to you, my boy. Mariette will not come back again."

On his way to Tabaret's, Lecoq had busied himself in preparing his story; and it was in the clearest possible manner that he related all the particulars, from the moment when Gévrol opened the door of the Poivrière, to the instant when May leaped over the garden wall in the rear of the Hôtel de Sairmeuse.

While the young detective was telling his story, old Tabaret seemed completely transformed. His gout was entirely forgotten. According to the different phases of the recital, he either turned and twisted on his bed, uttering little cries of delight or disappointment, or else lay motionless, plunged in the same kind of ecstatic reverie which enthusiastic admirers of classical music yield themselves up to while listening to one of the great Beethoven's divine sonatas.

"If I had been there! If only I had been there!" he murmured regret-

fully every now and then through his set teeth, though when Lecoq's story was finished, enthusiasm seemed decidedly to have gained the upper hand. "It is beautiful ! it is grand !" he exclaimed. "And with just that one phrase : 'It is the Prussians who are coming,' for a starting point ! Lecoq, my boy, I must say that you have conducted this affair like an angel !"

"Don't you mean to say like a fool ?" asked the discouraged detective.

"No, my friend, certainly not. You have rejoiced my old heart. I can die ; I shall have a successor. Ah ! that Gévrol who betrayed you—for he did betray you, there's no doubt about it—that obtuse, obstinate 'General' is not worthy to blacken your shoes !"

"You overpower me, Monsieur Tabaret !" interrupted Lecoq, as yet uncertain whether his host was poking fun at him or not. "But it is none the less true that May has disappeared, and I have lost my reputation, before I had begun to make it."

"Don't be in such a hurry to reject my compliments," replied old Tabaret, with a horrible grimace. "I say that you have conducted this investigation very well ; but it could have been done much better, very much better. You have a talent for your work, that's evident ; but you lack experience ; you become elated by a trifling advantage, or discouraged by a mere nothing ; you fail, and yet persist in holding fast to a fixed idea, as a moth flutters about a candle. Then, you are young. But never mind that, it's a fault you will outgrow only too soon. And now, to speak frankly, I must tell you that you have made a great many blunders."

Lecoq hung his head like a schoolboy receiving a reprimand from his teacher. After all was he not a scholar, and was not this old man his master ?

"I will now enumerate your mistakes," continued old Tabaret, "and I will show you how, on at least three occasions, you allowed an opportunity for solving this mystery to escape you."

"But,—"

"Pooh ! pooh ! my boy, let me talk a little while now. What axiom did you start with ? You said : 'Always distrust appearances ; believe precisely the contrary of what appears true, or even probable.'"

"Yes, that is exactly what I said to myself."

"And it was a very wise conclusion. With that idea in your lantern to light your path, you ought to have gone straight to the truth. But you are young, as I said before ; and the very first circumstance you find that seems at all probable, you quite forget the rule which, as you yourself admit, should have governed your conduct. As soon as you meet a fact that seems even *more* than probable, you swallow it as eagerly as a gudgeon swallows an angler's bait."

This comparison could but pique the young detective. "I don't think I've been so simple as that," protested he.

"Bah ! What did you think, then, when you heard that M. d'Escorval had broken his leg, in getting out of his carriage ?"

"Believe ! I believed what they told me, because—"

He paused, and Tiraclair burst into a hearty fit of laughter. "You believed it," he said, "because it was a very plausible story."

"What would you have believed had you been in my place ?"

"Exactly the opposite of what they told me. I might have been mistaken ; but it would be the logical conclusion of my first course of reasoning."

This conclusion was so bold that Lecoq was disconcerted. "What !" he

exclaimed ; " do you suppose that M. d'Escorval's fall was only a fiction ? that he didn't break his leg ? "

Old Tabaret's face suddenly assumed a serious expression. " I don't suppose it," he replied ; " I'm sure of it. "

XXIV.

LECOQ's confidence in the oracle he was consulting was very great ; but even old Tiraucclair might be mistaken, and what he had just said seemed such an enormity, so completely beyond the bounds of possibility, that the young man could not conceal a gesture of incredulous surprise.

" So, Monsieur Tabaret, you are ready to affirm that M. d'Escorval is in quite as good health as Father Absinthe or myself ; and that he has confined himself to his room for a couple of months to give a semblance of truth to a falsehood ? "

" I would be willing to swear it. "

" But what could possibly have been his object ? "

Tabaret lifted his hands to heaven, as if imploring forgiveness for the young man's stupidity. " And it was in you," he exclaimed, " in you that I saw a successor, a disciple to whom I might transmit my method of induction ; and now, you ask me such a question as that ! Reflect a moment. Must I give you an example to assist you ? Very well. Let it be so. Suppose yourself a magistrate. A crime is committed ; you are charged with the duty of investigating it, and you visit the prisoner to question him. Very well. This prisoner has, hitherto, succeeded in concealing his identity—this was the case in the present instance, was it not ? Very well. Now, what would you do, if, at the very first glance, you recognised under the prisoner's disguise your best friend, or your worst enemy ? What would you do, I ask ? "

" I should say to myself that a magistrate who is obliged to hesitate between his duty and his inclinations, is placed in a very trying position, and I should endeavour to avoid the responsibility. "

" I understand that ; but would you reveal this prisoner's identity—remember, he might be your friend or your enemy ? "

The question was so delicate that Lecoq remained silent for a moment, reflecting before he replied.

The pause was interrupted by Father Absinthe. " I should reveal nothing whatever ! " he exclaimed. " I should remain absolutely neutral. I should say to myself others are trying to discover this man's identity. Let them do so if they can ; but let my conscience be clear. "

This was the cry of honesty ; not the counsel of a casuist.

" I also should be silent," Lecoq at last replied ; " and it seems to me that, in holding my tongue, I should not fail in my duty as a magistrate. "

On hearing these words, Tabaret rubbed his hands together, as he always did when he was about to present some overwhelming argument. " Such being the case," said he, " do me the favour to tell me what pretext you would invent in order to withdraw from the case without exciting suspicion ? "

" I don't know ; I can't say now. But if I were placed in such a position I should find some excuse—invent something — "

" And if you could find nothing better," interrupted Tabaret, " you would adopt M. d'Escorval's expedient ; you would pretend you had broken

a limb. Only, as you are a clever fellow, you would sacrifice your arm it would be less inconvenient than your leg; and you wouldn't be condemned to seclusion for several months."

"So, Monsieur Tabaret, you are convinced that M. d'Escorval knows who May really is."

Old Tiraclair turned so suddenly in his bed that his forgotten gout drew from him a terrible groan. "Can you doubt it?" he exclaimed. "Can you possibly doubt it? What proofs do you want then? What connection do you see between the magistrate's fall and the prisoner's attempt at suicide? I wasn't there, as you were; I only know the story as you have told it to me. I can't look at the facts with my own eyes; but according to your statements, which are I suppose correct, this is what I understand. When M. d'Escorval has completed his task at the Widow Chupin's house, he comes to the prison to examine the supposed murderer. The two men recognize each other. Had they been alone, mutual explanations might have ensued, and affairs taken quite a different turn. But they were not alone; a third party was present—M. d'Escorval's clerk. So they could say nothing. The magistrate asked a few common-place questions, in a troubled voice, and the prisoner, terribly agitated, replied as best he could. Now, after leaving the cell, M. d'Escorval no doubt said to himself: 'I can't investigate the offences of a man I hate!' He was certainly terribly perplexed. When you tried to speak to him, as he was leaving the prison, he harshly told you to wait till the next day; and a quarter of an hour later he pretended to fall down and break his leg."

"Then you think that M. d'Escorval and May are enemies?" inquired Lecoq.

"Don't the facts prove that beyond a doubt?" retorted Tabaret. "If they had been friends, the magistrate might have acted in the same manner; but then the prisoner wouldn't have attempted to strangle himself. But thanks to you; his life was saved; for he owes his life to you. During the night, confined in a strait-waistcoat, he was powerless to injure himself. Ah! how he must have suffered that night! What agony! So, in the morning, when he was conducted to the magistrate's room for examination, it was with a sort of frenzy that he dashed into the dreaded presence of his enemy. He expected to find M. d'Escorval there, ready to triumph over his misfortunes; and he intended to say: 'Yes, it's I. There is a fatality in it. I have killed three men, and I am in your power. But there is a mortal feud between us, and for that very reason you haven't the right to prolong my tortures! It would be infamous cowardice if you did so.' However, instead of M. d'Escorval, he sees M. Segmuller. Then what happens? He is surprised, and his eyes betray the astonishment he feels when he realizes the generosity of his enemy—an enemy from whom he had expected no indulgence. Then a smile comes to his lips—a smile of hope; for he thinks, since M. d'Escorval has not betrayed his secret, that he may be able to keep it, and emerge, perhaps, from this shadow of shame and crime with his name and honour still untarnished."

Old Tabaret paused, and then, with a sudden change of tone and an ironical gesture, he added: "And that—is my explanation."

Father Absinthe had risen, frantic with delight. "Cristi!" he exclaimed: "that's it! that's it!"

Lecoq's approbation was none the less evident although unspoken. He could appreciate this rapid and wonderful work of induction far better than his companion.

For a moment or two old Tabaret reclined upon his pillows enjoying the sweets of admiration ; then he continued : “ Do you wish for further proofs, my boy ? Recollect the perseverance M. d’Escorval displayed in sending to M. Segmuller for information. I admit that a man may have a passion for his profession ; but not to such an extent as that. You believed that his leg was broken. Then were you not surprised to find a magistrate, with a broken limb, suffering mortal anguish, taking such wonderful interest in a miserable murderer ? I haven’t any broken bones, I’ve only got the gout ; but I know very well that when I’m suffering, half the world might be judging the other half, and yet the idea of sending Mariette for information would never occur to me. Ah ! a moment’s reflection would have enabled you to understand the reason of his solicitude, and would probably have given you the key to the whole mystery.”

Lecoq, who was such a brilliant casuist in the Widow Chupin’s hovel, who was so full of confidence in himself, and so earnest in expounding his theories to simple Father Absinthe—Lecoq hung his head abashed and did not utter a word. But he felt neither anger nor impatience. He had come to ask advice, and was glad that it should be given him. He had made many mistakes, as he now saw only too plainly ; and when they were pointed out to him he neither fumed nor fretted, nor tried to prove that he had been right when he had been wrong. This was certainly an excellent trait in his character.

Meanwhile, M. Tabaret had poured out a great glass of some cooling drink and drained it. He now resumed : “ I need not remind you of the mistake you made in not compelling Toinon Chupin to tell you all she knew about this affair while she was in your power. ‘A bird in the hand’—you know the proverb.”

“ Be assured, Monsieur Tabaret, that this mistake has cost me enough to make me realize the danger of allowing a well-disposed witness’s zeal to cool down.”

“ We will say no more about that, then. But I must tell you that three or four times, at least, it has been in your power to clear up this mystery.”

The oracle paused, awaiting some protestation from his disciple. None came however. “ If he says this,” thought the young detective, “ it must indeed be so.”

This discretion made a great impression on old Tabaret, and increased the esteem he had conceived for Lecoq. “ The first time that you were lacking in discretion,” said he, “ was when you tried to discover the owner of the diamond earring found at the Poivrière.”

“ I made every effort to discover the last owner.”

“ You tried very hard, I don’t deny it ; but as for making every effort—that’s quite another thing. For instance, when you heard that the Baroness de Watchau was dead, and that all her property had been sold, what did you do ? ”

“ You know ; I went immediately to the person who had charge of the sale.”

“ Very well ! and afterwards ? ”

“ I examined the catalogue ; and as, among the jewels mentioned, I could find none that answered the description of these diamonds, I knew that the clue was quite lost.”

“ There is precisely where you are mistaken ! ” exclaimed old Tiraclair, exultantly. “ If such valuable jewels are not mentioned in the catalogue of the sale, the Baroness de Watchau could not have possessed them at the time of her death. And if she no longer possessed them she must have

given them away, or sold them. And who could she have sold them to? To one of her lady friends, very probably. For this reason, had I been in your place, I should have found out the names of her intimate friends; this would have been a very easy task; and then, I should have tried to win the favour of all the lady's-maids in the service of these friends. This would have only been a pastime for a good-looking young fellow like you. Then, I should have shown this earring to each maid in succession until I found one who said: 'That diamond belongs to my mistress,' or one who was seized with a nervous trembling."

"And to think that this idea did not once occur to me!" ejaculated Lecoq. "Wait, wait, I am coming to the second mistake you made," retorted the oracle. "What did you do when you obtained possession of the trunk which May pretended was his? Why you played directly into this cunning adversary's hand. How could you fail to see that this trunk was only an accessory article; a bit of 'property' got ready in 'mounting' the 'comedy.' You should have known that it could only have been deposited with Madame Milner by the accomplice, and that all its contents must have been purchased for the occasion."

"I knew this, of course; but even under these circumstances, what could I do?"

"What could you do, my boy? Well, I am only a poor old man, but I should have interviewed every clothier in Paris; and at last some one would have exclaimed: 'Those articles! Why, I sold them to an individual like this or that—who purchased them for one of his friends whose measure he brought with him.'"

Angry with himself, Lecoq struck his clenched hand violently upon the table beside him. "*Sacrebleu!*" he exclaimed, "that method was infallible, and so simple too! Ah! I shall never forgive myself for my stupidity as long as I live!"

"Gently, gently!" interrupted old Tiraclair. "You are going too far, my dear boy. Stupidity is not the proper word at all; you should say carelessness, thoughtlessness. You are young—what else could one expect? What is far less inexcusable is the manner in which you conducted the chase, after the prisoner was allowed to escape."

"Alas!" murmured the young man, now completely discouraged; "did I blunder in that?"

"Terribly, my son; and here is where I really blame you. What diabolical influence induced you to follow May, step by step, like a common policeman?"

This time Lecoq was stupefied. "Ought I to have allowed him to escape me?" he inquired.

"No; but if I had been by your side in the gallery of the Odeon, when you so clearly divined the prisoner's intentions, I should have said to you: 'This fellow, friend Lecoq, will hasten to Madame Milner's house to inform her of his escape. Let us run after him.' I shouldn't have tried to prevent his seeing her, mind; but when he had left the Hôtel de Mariembourg, I should have added: 'Now, let him go where he chooses: but attach yourself to Madame Milner; don't lose sight of her; cling to her as closely as her own shadow, for she will lead you to the accomplice—that is to say—to the solution of the mystery.'"

"That's the truth; I see it now."

"But instead of that, what did you do? You ran to the hotel, you terrified the boy! When a fisherman has cast his bait and the fish are swimming

near, he doesn't sound a gong to frighten them all away !”

Thus it was that old Tabaret reviewed the entire course of investigation and pursuit, remodeling it in accordance with his own method of induction. Lecoq had originally had a magnificent inspiration. In his first investigations he had displayed remarkable talent ; and yet he had not succeeded. Why ! Simply because he had neglected the axiom with which he started : “ Always distrust what seems probable ! ”

But the young man listened to the oracle's “ summing up ” with divided attention. A thousand projects were darting through his brain, and at length he could no longer restrain himself. “ You have saved me from despair,” he exclaimed, “ I thought everything was lost ; but I see that my blunders can be repaired. What I neglected to do, I can do now ; there is still time. Haven't I the diamond earring, as well as various effects belonging to the prisoner, still in my possession. Madame Milner still owns the Hôtel de Mariembourg, and I will watch her.”

“ And what for, my boy ? ”

“ What for ? Why, to find my fugitive, to be sure ! ”

Had the young detective been less engrossed with his idea, he would have detected a slight smile that curved Papa Tiraucclair's thick lips.

“ Ah, my son ! is it possible that you don't suspect the real name of this pretended buffoon ? ” enquired the oracle somewhat despondently.

Lecoq trembled and averted his face. He did not wish Tabaret to see his eyes. “ No,” he replied, “ I don't suspect——”

“ You are uttering a falsehood ! ” interrupted the sick man. “ You know as well as I do, that May resides in the Rue de Grenelle-Saint-Germain, and that he is known as the Duke de Sairmeuse.”

On hearing these words, Father Absinthe indulged in a hearty laugh : “ Ah ! that's a good joke ! ” he exclaimed. “ Ah, ha ! ”

Such was not Lecoq's opinion, however. “ Well, yes, Monsieur Tabaret,” said he, “ the idea *did* occur to me ; but I drove it away.”

“ And why, if you please ? ”

“ Because—because——”

“ Because you would not believe in the logical sequence of your premises ; but I am consistent, and I say that it seems impossible the murderer arrested in the Widow Chupin's drinking den should be the Duke de Sairmeuse. Hence, the murderer arrested there, May, the pretended buffoon, is the Duke de Sairmeuse ! ”

XXIV.

How this idea had entered old Tabaret's head, Lecoq could not understand. A vague suspicion had, it is true, flitted through his own mind ; but it was in a moment of despair, when he was distracted at having lost May, and when certain of Couturier's remarks furnished the excuse for any ridiculous supposition. And yet now Father Tiraucclair calmly proclaimed this suspicion—which Lecoq had not dared seriously to entertain, even for an instant—to be an undoubted fact.

“ You look as if you had suddenly fallen from the clouds,” exclaimed the oracle, noticing his visitor's amazement. “ Do you suppose that I spoke at random like a parrot ? ”

“ No, certainly not, but——”

“ Hush ! You are surprised because you know nothing of contemporary

history. If you don't wish to remain all your life a common detective, like your friend Gévrol, you must read, and make yourself familiar with all the leading events of the century."

"I must confess that I don't see the connection."

M. Tabaret did not deign to reply. Turning to Father Absinthe, he requested the old detective, in the most affable tones, to go to the library and fetch two large volumes entitled: "General Biography of the Men of the Present Age," which he would find in the book-case on the right. Father Absinthe hastened to obey; and as soon as the books were brought, M. Tabaret began turning the pages with an eager hand, like a person seeking some word in a dictionary.

"Esbayron," he muttered, "Escars, Escayrac, Escher, Escodica—at last we have it—Escorval! Listen attentively, my boy, and you will be enlightened."

This injunction was entirely unnecessary. Never had the young detective's faculties been more keenly on the alert. It was in an emphatic voice that the sick man then read: "Escorval (Louis-Guillaume, baron d').—Diplomatist and politician, born at Montaignac, December 3rd, 1769, of an old family of lawyers. He was completing his studies in Paris at the outbreak of the Revolution and embraced the popular cause with all the ardour of youth. But, soon disapproving the excesses committed in the name of Liberty, he sided with the Reactionists, advised, perhaps, by Roederer, who was one of his relatives. Commended to the favour of the First Consul by M. de Talleyrand, he began his diplomatic career with a mission to Switzerland; and during the existence of the first empire he was entrusted with many important negotiations. Devoted to the Emperor, he found himself gravely compromised at the advent of the Second Restoration. At the time of the celebrated rising at Montaignac, he was arrested on the double charge of high treason and conspiracy. He was tried by a military commission, and condemned to death. The sentence was not executed, however. He owed his life to the noble devotion and heroic energy of a priest, one of his friends, the Abbé Midon, curé of the little village of Sairmeuse. The baron d'Escorval had only one son, who embraced the judicial profession at a very early age."

Lecoq was intensely disappointed. "I understand," he remarked. "This is the biography of our magistrate's father. Only I don't see that it teaches us anything."

An ironical smile curved old Tiraucclair's lips, "It teaches us that M. d'Escorval's father was condemned to death," he replied. "That's something, I assure you. A little patience, and you will soon know everything."

Having found a new leaf, he recommenced to read: "Sairmeuse (Anne-Marie-Victor de Tingry, Duke de).—A French general and politician, born at the château de Sairmeuse, near Montaignac, in 1758. The Sairmeuse family is one of the oldest and most illustrious in France. It must not be confounded with the ducal family of Sermeuse, whose name is written with an 'e.' Leaving France at the beginning of the Revolution, Anne de Sairmeuse began by serving in the army of Condé. Some years later he offered his sword to Russia; and it is asserted by some of his biographers that he was fighting in the Russian ranks at the time of the disastrous retreat from Moscow. Returning to France with the Bourbons, he became notorious by the intensity of his ultra-royalist opinions. It is certain that he had the good fortune to regain possession of his immense family estates; and the rank and dignities which he had gained in foreign lands were con-

firmed. Appointed by the king to preside at the military commission charged with arresting and trying the conspirators of Montaignac, his zeal and severity resulted in the capture and conviction of all the parties implicated.”

Lecoq sprang up with sparkling eyes. “I see it clearly now,” he exclaimed. “The father of the present Duke de Sairmeuse tried to have the father of the present M. d’Escorval beheaded.”

M. Tabaret was the picture of complacency. “You see the assistance history gives,” said he. “But I have not finished, my boy; the present Duke de Sairmeuse also has his article which will be of interest to us. So listen : Sairmeuse (Anne-Marie-Martial)—Son of the preceding, was born in London towards the close of the last century ; received his early education in England, and completed it at the Court of Austria, which he subsequently visited on several confidential missions. Heir to the opinions, prejudices, and animosities of his father, he placed at the service of his party a highly cultivated intellect, unusual penetration, and extraordinary abilities. A leader at a time when political passion was raging highest, he had the courage to assume the sole responsibility of the most unpopular measures. The hostility he encountered, however, eventually obliged him to retire from office, leaving behind him animosities likely to terminate only with his life.”

The sick man closed the book, and with assumed modesty, he asked : “Ah, well ! What do you think of my little method of induction ?”

But Lecoq was too much engrossed with his own thoughts to reply to this question. “I think,” he remarked, “that if the Duke de Sairmeuse had disappeared for two months—the period of May’s imprisonment, all Paris would have known of it—and so—”

“You are dreaming,” interrupted Tabaret. “Why with his wife and his valet de chambre for accomplices, the duke could absent himself for a year if he liked, and yet all his servants would believe him to be in the house.”

“I admit that,” said Lecoq, at last : “but unfortunately, there is one circumstance which completely upsets the theory we have built up so laboriously.”

“And what is that, if you please ?”

“If the man who took part in the broil at the Poivrière had been the Duke de Sairmeuse, he would have disclosed his name—he would have declared that, having been attacked, he had only defended himself—and his name alone would have opened the prison-doors. Instead of that, what did the prisoner do ? He attempted to kill himself. Would a grand seigneur, like the Duke de Sairmeuse, to whom life must be a perpetual enchantment, have thought of committing suicide ?”

A mocking whistle from old Tabaret interrupted the speaker. “You seem to have forgotten the last sentence in his biography : ‘M. Sairmeuse leaves behind him ill-will and hatred.’ Do you know the price he might have been compelled to pay for his liberty ! No—no more do I. To explain his presence at the Poivrière, and the presence of a woman, who was, perhaps his wife, who knows what disgraceful secrets he would have been obliged to reveal ? Between shame and suicide, he chose suicide. He wished to save his name and honour intact.”

Old Tiraucclair spoke with such vehemence that even Father Absinthe was deeply impressed, although, to tell the truth, he had understood but little of the conversation. However, he was now delighted and confident.

As for Lecoq, he rose very pale, his lips trembling a little—like a man who has just taken an invincible determination. “You will excuse my hypocrisy, Monsieur Tabaret,” he said in an agitated voice. “I only offered these last objections for form’s sake. I had thought of what you now say, but I distrusted myself, and I wanted to hear you say it yourself. Then with an imperious gesture, he added: “Now, I know what I have to do.”

Old Tabaret raised his hands toward heaven with every sign of intense dismay. “Unhappy man!” he exclaimed; “do you think of going to arrest the Duke de Sairmeuse! Poor Lecoq! Free, this man is almost omnipotent, and you, an infinitesimal agent of police, would be shattered as easily as glass. Take care, my boy, don’t attack the duke. I wouldn’t be responsible for the consequences. You might imperil your life.”

The young detective shook his head. “Oh! I don’t deceive myself,” said he. “I know that the duke is far beyond my reach—at least for the present. But he will be in my power again, the day I learn his secret. I don’t fear danger; but I know, that if I am to succeed, I must conceal myself, and so I will. Yes, I will remain in the shade until I can unveil this mystery; but then I shall re-appear in my true character. And if May be really the Duke de Sairmeuse, I shall have my revenge.”

PART II.

THE HONOUR OF THE NAME.

I.

ON the first Sunday in the month of August, 1815, at ten o'clock precisely, the sacristan of the parish church of Sairmeuse gave, according to custom, three successive pulls at the bell—placed high in the tower above—to warn the faithful that the priest was about to ascend the steps of the altar to celebrate high mass. The church was already more than half full, and from every side came groups of peasants, hurrying towards the church-yard. The women were all in their bravest attire, with dainty 'kerchiefs crossed upon their breasts, broad-striped, brightly-coloured skirts, reaching to their ankles, and large white caps set upon their heads. Being of an economical mind, although coquettish, they mostly came barefooted, carrying their shoes in their hands, and only putting them on as they were about to enter the house of worship.

But few of the men went in to the church. They remained outside to talk, seating themselves in the porch, or standing about the yard, in the shade of the grand old elms. For such was the custom in the village of Sairmeuse. The two hours which the women consecrated to prayer the men employed in discussing the news, the success or failure of the crops; and, before the service came to a close, they could generally be found, glass in hand, in the long public room of the village hostelry.

For the farmers for a league around, Sunday mass at Sairmeuse was only an excuse for meeting together to hold, as it were, a kind of weekly exchange. Since the re-establishment of religion all the curés who had been successively stationed at Sairmeuse had endeavoured to put an end to this scandalous habit of turning God's area into an exchange, but all their efforts had proved unavailing. The obstinate peasantry would only make one concession. At the moment of the elevation of the host, all voices outside the church were hushed, heads uncovered, and a few of the less sceptical farmers even bowed the knee, and made the sign of the cross. But this was the affair of an instant only, and then conversation anent crops, cattle, wine, wood, and so on was resumed with increased vivacity.

But on that particular Sunday in August the usual animation was wanting; and the comments exchanged among little knots of villagers gathered here and there among the tombstones under the trees were scarcely audible. Ordinarily there would have been no dearth of noisy discussions between the various buyers and sellers—discussions well nigh interminable, and punctuated at frequent intervals with some loud-spoken popular oath, such as "By my faith in God!" or "May the devil burn me!" To-day, however, the farmers were not talking, they were whispering together.

Each face was sad ; lips were placed cautiously at each listener's ear ; and anxiety could be read in every eye. Evidently, some great misfortune had occurred.

In point of fact, only a month had elapsed since Louis XVIII. had been, for the second time, installed at the Tuileries by the efforts of a triumphant coalition. The earth had scarcely had time to imbibe the blood that had flowed at Waterloo ; twelve hundred thousand foreign soldiers desecrated the soil of France ; and a Prussian general was Governor of Paris.

The peasantry of Sairmeuse trembled with indignation and fear. This king, brought back by the allies, was no less to be dreaded than the allies themselves. To these non-political country folks, the great name of Bourbon only signified a terrible burden of taxation and oppression. Above all, it signified ruin—for there was scarcely one among them who had not purchased from the government of the Revolution or the Empire, some patch of the land confiscated after the downfall of Louis XVI. ; and now it was currently reported that all the estates would have to be surrendered to the former landowners, who had emigrated when the Bourbons were overthrown.

Hence, it was with feverish curiosity that most of the Sairmeuse peasants clustered round a young man who, only two days before, had returned from the army. With tears of rage in his eyes, he was recounting the shame and misery of the invasion. He described the pillage at Versailles, the exactions at Orleans, and the pitiless requisitions of the allied army.

"And these cursed foreigners to whom the traitors have delivered us, will remain here," he exclaimed, "as long as there's a sou and a bottle of wine left in France !" So speaking, he shook his clenched fist menacingly at a white flag that floated from the tower of the church.

His generous anger won the close attention of his audience, who were still listening to him with undiminished interest, when the sound of a horse's hoofs resounded on the stones of the one long street of Sairmeuse. A shudder passed through the crowd, and the same fear slackened the beating of every heart. Who could say but what this rider was not some English or Prussian officer, who had come perhaps to announce the arrival of his regiment, and to demand, with all a conqueror's harshness, money, food, and clothing for his men ?

But the suspense was not of long duration. Instead of a uniform the rider wore a soiled blue blouse, and in lieu of a charger with military trappings, he bestrode a saddleless, bony, nervous little mare, covered with foam, which he was urging forward with repeated blows of an improvised whip.

"Ah ! it's Father Chupin," murmured one of the peasants with a sigh of relief.

"The same," observed another. "He seems to be in a terrible hurry."

"The old rascal has probably stolen the horse he is riding," remarked a third.

This last remark revealed the reputation that the rider of the saddleless mare enjoyed among his neighbours. He was, in fact, one of those rascals who are the scourge and terror of rural districts. He pretended to be a day-labourer, but in reality he held all work in holy horror, and spent most of his time idling about his hovel. Indeed, he and his wife and their two sons—terrible youths who, somehow, had escaped the conscription—lived entirely by theft. Everything they consumed was stolen : wheat, wine, fuel, fruits—all being the property of others, while poaching and fishing in closed time furnished

them with ready money. Every one in the neighbourhood was aware of this; and yet when Father Chupin was pursued and captured, as occasionally happened, no one could ever be found to testify against him.

"He's such a dangerous fellow," the peasantry remarked. "If any one denounced him, why on leaving prison he would simply lie in ambush and send an ounce of lead into his enemy's brains."

While the farmers assembled in the churchyard were thus exchanging comments concerning him, the rider of the saddleless mare had drawn rein in front of the local hostelry—the inn of the Bœuf Couronné or Crowned Bull. Alighting from his steed and crossing the square he walked towards the church.

He was a tall man of fifty or thereabouts, and as gnarled and sinewy as the stem of some ancient vine. At the first glance he would not have been taken for a scoundrel, for his demeanour was humble and even gentle. The restlessness of his eyes and the expression of his thin lips betrayed, however, a spirit of diabolical cunning and calculation. At any other moment this half despised, half dreaded individual would have been avoided; but curiosity and anxiety now led the crowd toward him.

"Ah, well, Father Chupin!" cried the peasants, as soon as he was within hearing, "where do you come from in such a tremendous haste?"

"From the city." To the inhabitants of Sairmeuse and its environs, "the city" meant the chief town of the arrondissement, Montaignac, a charming sub-préfecture of eight thousand souls, about four leagues distant.

"And did you buy the horse you were riding just now at Montaignac?"

"I didn't buy it; it was lent to me."

Coming from such a rascal this was so strange an assertion that his listeners could not repress a smile. He did not seem, however, to notice their incredulity.

"It was lent me," he continued, "in order that I might bring some great news here as quickly as possible."

For a moment a vague fear struck the inquisitive farmers dumb. "Is the enemy in the city?" one of the more timid eventually inquired in an anxious tone.

"Yes, but not the enemy you mean. The new arrival is our old lord of the manor, his grace the Duke de Sairmeuse."

"What! why people said he was dead."

"They were mistaken."

"Have you seen him?"

"No, I have not seen him, but some one else has seen him for me, and has spoken to him. And this some one is M. Laugeron, the landlord of the Hôtel de France at Montaignac. I was passing the house this morning, when he called me. 'Here old fellow,' said he, 'will you do me a favour?' Naturally I replied I would, whereupon he placed a coin in my hand and said: 'Well go round to the stable and tell them to saddle a horse for you, then gallop to Sairmeuse as fast as you can and tell my friend Lacheneur that the Duke de Sairmeuse arrived here last night in a post-chaise, with his son Monsieur Martial, and two servants.'" Father Chupin paused. "The news was important," said he. "And as there wasn't an ostler in the stable and I couldn't find a saddle I came here as quickly as I could on the beast's bare back."

The peasants were listening with pale cheeks and set teeth, and Father Chupin strove to preserve the subdued mien appropriate to a messenger of misfortune. But if one had observed him carefully, a swiftly repressed

smile of irony might have been detected on his lips, and a gleam of malicious joy in his eyes. He was, in fact, inwardly jubilant, for at that moment he was having his revenge for all the slights and all the scorn he had been forced to endure. And what a revenge it was! If his words seemed to fall slowly and reluctantly from his lips, it was only because he was trying to prolong the sufferings of his audience as much as possible.

However, a stalwart young peasant, with an intelligent face, who, perhaps, read the old rascal's secret heart, brusquely interrupted him. "What can we care for the presence of the Duke de Sairmeuse at Montaignac?" said he. "Let him remain at the Hôtel de France as long as he chooses; we shan't go in search of him."

"No! we shan't go in search of him," echoed the other peasants approvingly.

The old rogue shook his head with affected commiseration. "The duke will not put you to that trouble," he replied; "he will be here in less than a couple of hours."

"How do you know that?"

"I know it through M. Laugeron, who, just as I was starting, said, 'Above all, old man, explain to my friend Lacheneur that the duke has ordered horses to be ready to take him to Sairmeuse at eleven o'clock.'"

"With a common impulse all the peasants who had watches consulted them."

"And what does he want here?" asked the same young farmer who had spoken before.

"Excuse me but he didn't tell me," replied Father Chupin, "though one need not be very cunning to guess. He comes to revisit his former estates, and to take them from those who have purchased them, if possible. From you, Rousselet, he will claim the meadows on the Oiselle, which always yield two crops; from you, Father Gauchais, the ground on which the Croix-Brulée stands: from you, Chalouineau, the vineyards on the Borderie——"

Chalouineau was the impetuous young fellow who had twice interrupted Father Chupin already. "Claim the Borderie!" he exclaimed, with even greater violence than before, "let him try—and we'll see. It was waste land when my father bought it—covered with briars; why a goat couldn't have found pasture there. We have cleared it of stones, we have scratched up the soil with our very nails, watered it with our sweat, and now this duke wants to take it from us! Ah! he shall have my last drop of blood first."

"I don't say but——"

"But what? Is it any fault of ours if the nobles fled to foreign lands? We haven't stolen their lands, have we? The government offered them for sale; we bought them, and paid for them; they are lawfully ours."

"That's true; but M. de Sairmeuse is the great friend of the king."

The young soldier whose voice had aroused the most noble sentiments only a moment before, was now no longer remembered. Invaded France, the threatening enemy, were alike forgotten. The all-powerful instinct of avarice had been suddenly aroused.

"In my opinion," resumed Chalouineau, "we had better consult the Baron d'Escorval."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed the peasants; "let us go at once!"

They were starting, when a villager who sometimes read the papers, checked them with the remark, "Take care what you are about. Don't

you know that since the return of the Bourbons M. d'Escorval is of no account whatever? Fouché has him on the proscription list, and he is under the surveillance of the police."

This objection dampened the general enthusiasm. "That's true," murmured some of the older men, "a visit to M. d'Escorval would, perhaps, do us more harm than good. And, besides, what advice could he give us?"

Chalouineau had forgotten all prudence. "What of that!" he exclaimed. "If M. d'Escorval has no advice to give us about this matter, he can, perhaps, teach us how to resist and to defend ourselves."

For some moments Father Chupin had been studying, with a placid countenance, the storm of anger he had aroused. In his secret heart he experienced an incendiary's satisfaction at the sight of the flames he had kindled. Perhaps he already had a presentiment of the infamous part he would play a few months later. However, satisfied with his experiment, he now thought fit to assume the role of moderator.

"Wait a little. Don't cry before you are hurt," he exclaimed in an ironical tone. "Who told you that the Duke de Sairmeuse would trouble you? How much of his former domain do you all own between you? Almost nothing. A few fields and meadows, and a hill on the Borderie. All these together didn't yield him five thousand livres a year in the old days."

"Yes, that's true," replied Chalouineau; "and if the revenue you mention is now four times as much it is only because the land is in the hands of forty farmers who cultivate it themselves."

"Which is another reason why the duke is not likely to say a word; he won't wish to set the whole district in commotion. In my opinion he will only proceed against one person—against our late mayor—M. Lacheneur in short." Ah! the wily poacher knew only too well the egotism of his compatriots. He knew with what complacency and eagerness they would accept an expiatory victim whose sacrifice would be their salvation.

"That's a fact," remarked an old man; "M. Lacheneur owns nearly all the Sairmeuse property."

"Say all, while you are about it," rejoined Father Chupin. "Where does M. Lacheneur live? Why in the beautiful Château de Sairmeuse, whose towers we can see there through the trees. He hunts in the forests which once belonged to the Dukes de Sairmeuse; he fishes in their lakes; he drives the horses that once belonged to them, seated in the carriages on which one might still see their coat of arms, if it hadn't been painted out. Twenty years ago, Lacheneur was a poor devil like myself; now he's a grand gentleman with a princely income. He wears the finest broad-cloth and top-boots just like the Baron d'Escorval. Instead of working himself he makes others work for him, and when he passes by every one must bow to the earth. If you kill so much as a sparrow on his lands he will have you thrown into prison. Ah, he has been a lucky fellow. The emperor made him mayor. The Bourbons deprived him of his office; but what does that matter to him? He is still the real master here, just as the dukes were in other days. His son is pursuing his studies in Paris, with the intention of becoming a notary. As for his daughter, Mademoiselle Marie-Anne——"

"Not a word against her!" exclaimed Chalouineau; "if she were mistress, there wouldn't be a poor man in the neighbourhood. Ask your wife if that isn't the case, Father Chupin."

This was an affront which the rascal Chupin would never forget as long as he lived; still for the moment he swallowed it without any show of out

ward resentment. "I don't say that Mademoiselle Marie-Anne is not generous," he replied with affected humility, "but after all her charitable work, she has plenty of money left for her fine dresses and other fancies. I think M. Lacheneur might be very well content to give the duke back half or even three-quarters of the property he acquired no one ever knew how. He would still have enough left to grind the poor under foot."

After appealing to selfishness, Father Chupin now appealed to envy. There could be no doubt of his success. But he had no time to pursue his advantage. Mass was over, and the worshippers were leaving the church. Soon there stood on the threshold of the porch the man he had alluded to—M. Lacheneur—mayor of Sairmeuse in the days of the vanquished emperor. A young girl of dazzling beauty leant upon his arm. Father Chupin walked straight towards him and brusquely delivered his message. M. Lacheneur staggered beneath the blow. He turned first so red, and then so frightfully pale, that those around him thought he was about to fall. But he quickly recovered his self-possession, and without a word to the messenger, walked rapidly away leading his daughter with him.

Some minutes later an old post-chaise, drawn by four horses, dashed through the village at a gallop, and paused before the curé's house. Then one might have witnessed a singular spectacle. Father Chupin had gathered his wife and sons together, and the four surrounded the carriage, shouting with all the power of their lungs:

"Long live the Duke de Sairmeuse!"

II.

A GENTLY inclined road, more than two miles in length, shaded by a quadruple row of venerable elms leads from the village to the Château de Sairmeuse. Nothing could be more beautiful than this avenue, a fit approach to a palace; and the stranger who beheld it would at once understand the popular proverb of the district: "He does not know the real beauty of France, who has never seen Sairmeuse nor the Oiselle." The Oiselle is a little river crossed by a wooden bridge on leaving the village, and the clear rapid waters of which give a delicious freshness to the valley. At every step as one ascends the avenue the view changes. It is as if an enchanting panorama were being slowly enrolled before one. On the right the saw-pits of Féréol and the windmills of La Rèche may be perceived. On the left the tree-tops of the forest of Dolomieu tremble in the breeze. Those imposing ruins across the river are all that remain of the feudal castle of the house of Breulh. That red brick mansion, with granite trimmings, half concealed by a bend in the stream, belongs to the Baron d'Escorval. And if the day is clear, one can easily distinguish the spires of Montaignac in the distance.

This was the road taken by M. Lacheneur after Chupin had delivered his message. But what did the late mayor of Sairmeuse care for the beauties of the landscape! Standing under the church porch he had received his death wound; and now, with a tottering step, he dragged himself along like some poor soldier, mortally wounded upon the field of battle, who searches for a ditch or quiet nook where to lie down and die. He seemed to have lost all thought of the surroundings—all consciousness of previous events. He pursued his way, lost in his reflections, and guided only by force of habit. Two or three times his daughter, who was walking by his side, tried to

speak to him ; but an "Ah ! let me alone !" uttered in a harsh tone, was the only reply she obtained. Evidently M. Lacheneur had received a terrible blow ; and undoubtedly, as often happens under such circumstances, the unfortunate man was reviewing all the different phases of his life.

At twenty he was only a poor ploughboy in the service of the Sairmeuse family. His ambition was modest then ; and stretched beneath a tree at the hour of noonday rest, he indulged in dreams as simple as his calling. "If I could but amass a hundred pistoles," he thought, "I would ask Father Barrois for the hand of his daughter Martha ; and he wouldn't refuse me."

A hundred pistoles ! A thousand francs !—an enormous sum for one who, during two years of toil and privation had only laid by eleven louis, placed carefully in a tiny box and hidden in the depth of his straw mattress. Still, he did not despair, for he had read in Martha's eyes that she would wait. And Mademoiselle Armande de Sairmeuse, a rich old maid, was his godmother ; and he thought, if he attracted her adroitly, that he might, perhaps, interest her in his love affair.

Then suddenly the terrible storm of the Revolution burst over France. With the fall of the first thunderbolts, the Duke de Sairmeuse left France with the Count d'Artois. They took refuge in foreign lands much after the same fashion as a passer-by might seek shelter in a door-way from a summer shower, saying to himself : "This will not last long." The storm did last, however, and the following year Mademoiselle Armande, who had remained at Sairmeuse, died. The château was then closed, the president of the district took possession of the keys in the name of the government, and the servants became scattered in various parts.

Lacheneur took up his residence in Montaignac. Young, daring, and personally attractive, blessed with an energetic face, and an intelligence far above his station, it was not long before he became well known in the political clubs. For three months indeed Lacheneur was the virtual dictator of Montaignac.

But this profession of public agitator is seldom lucrative ; hence the surprise throughout the district was immense, when people learned that the former ploughboy had purchased the château, and almost all the land belonging to his former masters. It is true that the nation had sold this princely domain for scarcely a twentieth part of its real value. It had been valued at sixty-nine thousand francs. To sell it for so beggarly an amount was equivalent to giving it away. And yet, it was necessary to have this sum, and strange to say the apparently penniless Lacheneur possessed it, since he had poured a flood of beautiful louis d'or into the hands of the receiver of the district.

From that moment his popularity waned. The patriots who had applauded the ploughboy cursed the capitalist. He discreetly left his former friends to recover from their rage as best they could, and returned to Sairmeuse. There every one bowed low before Citoyen Lacheneur. Unlike most people, he did not forget his past hopes at the moment when they might be realized. He married Martha Barrois, and leaving the country to work out its own salvation without his assistance, he gave his time and attention to agriculture.

Any close observer in those days would have surmised that the man was bewildered by the sudden change in his situation. His manner was so troubled and anxious that, to see him, he would have been taken for a servant in constant fear of being detected in some indiscretion. At first he did not

open the château, but installed himself and his young wife in the cottage formerly occupied by the head gamekeeper, near the entrance of the park. But, little by little, with the habit of possession, came assurance. The Consulate had succeeded the Directory, the Empire succeeded the Consulate, and Citoyen Lacheneur became Monsieur Lacheneur. Appointed mayor two years later, he left the cottage and took possession of the château. The former ploughboy slept in the bed of the Dukes de Sairmeuse ; he ate off the massive plate bearing their escutcheon ; and he received his visitors in the same magnificent suite of rooms where the proud peers had received their friends in years gone by.

To those who had known him in former days, M. Lacheneur had become unrecognizable. He had adapted himself to his lofty station. Blushing at his own ignorance, he had had the courage—wonderful in one of his age—to acquire the education which he lacked. Then all his undertakings were successful to such a degree that his good luck had become proverbial. It sufficed for him to take any part in an enterprise for it to turn out well. The blessings of wedded life, moreover, were not denied him, for his wife had given him two lovely children, a son and a daughter ; while on the other hand his property, managed with a shrewdness and sagacity the former owners had not possessed, yielded a princely income.

How many under similar circumstances would have lost their heads ! But Lacheneur retained all his habitual coolness. In spite of the luxury that surrounded him, his own habits continued simple and frugal. He never had an attendant for his own person. His large income was almost entirely consecrated to the improvement of the estate or to the purchase of more land. And yet he was not avaricious. In all that concerned his wife or children he did not count the cost. His son, Jean, had been educated in Paris, for he wished him to be fitted for any position. Unwilling to consent to a separation from his daughter, he had entrusted her to the care of a resident governess. Sometimes his friends accused him of an inordinate ambition for his children ; but at any such remark he would sadly shake his head and reply, " All I want is to ensure them a modest and comfortable future, though it is folly indeed to count upon the time to come. Thirty years ago, who could have foreseen that the Sairmeuse family would ever be deprived of their estates ? "

With such opinions he should have been a good master ; and such he was, though no one ever thought the better of him on that account. His former comrades could not forgive him for his sudden elevation, and seldom spoke of him without wishing his ruin in ambiguous language.

Alas ! evil days were to come. Towards the close of the year 1812, he lost his wife : while the disasters of 1813 swept away a large portion of his personal fortune, invested in a manufacturing enterprise. At the advent of the first Restoration, he was obliged to conceal himself for a time ; and to cap the climax the conduct of his son, who was still in Paris, caused him serious disquietude. He already believed himself the most unfortunate of men, and now here was another misfortune threatening him—a misfortune so terrible that all the others were forgotten in the contemplation of it. Twenty years had elapsed since the day he had purchased Sairmeuse. Twenty years ! And yet it seemed to him only yesterday that, blushing and trembling, he had laid those piles of louis d'or on the desk of the district receiver. Had he dreamed it ? No he had not dreamed it. His whole life, with its struggles and miseries, its hopes and fears, its unexpected joys and blighted hopes passed in review before him.

Lost in these memories, he had quite forgotten the present situation, when a commonplace incident, more powerful than his daughter's voice, brought him back to the threatening reality. The park gate leading to the Château de Sairneuse, to *his* château, was locked. He shook it violently in a fit of rage, and being unable to break the lock, found some relief in breaking the bell.

On hearing the noise, a gardener hastened to the spot.

"Why is this gate closed?" demanded M. Lacheneur, with unwonted violence of manner. "By what right do you barricade my house when I, the master, am out of doors?"

The gardener tried to make some excuse. "Hold your tongue!" interrupted his master. "I dismiss you; you are no longer in my service."

Leaving the bewildered gardener to his astonishment, he walked on through the pleasure grounds—past the velvet lawns fringed with summer flowers and dense patches of shrubbery. In the vestibule, paved and panelled with mosaics of marble, three of his tenants sat awaiting him, for it was on Sunday that he always received those farmers who desired to confer with him. The three even rose at his approach, and deferentially doffed their hats. But he did not give them time to utter a word.

"Who allowed you to enter here?" he said in a savage voice, "and what do you desire? They sent you to play the spy on me, did they? Well, get out now and at once!"

The three farmers were even more bewildered than the gardener had been, and exchanged many comments of dismay. But M. Lacheneur did not hear them. Throwing open a sculptured door he had dashed into the grand saloon followed by his frightened daughter.

Never had Marie-Anne seen her father in such a mood; and she fairly trembled, affected for the moment by the most terrible presentiments. She had heard it said that under the influence of some dire calamity men have sometimes suddenly lost their reason, and she was wondering if her father had become insane. Many might really have supposed that such was the case, for his eyes flashed, his lips twitched and convulsive shudders shook his entire frame. He made the circuit of the drawing-room as a wild beast makes the circuit of its cage, uttering harsh imprecations and making frenzied gestures. His actions were quite incomprehensible. Sometimes he seemed to be trying the thickness of the carpet with the toe of his boot, and sometimes he threw himself on to a chair or a sofa as if to test their softness. Occasionally he paused abruptly before one of the valuable pictures that covered the walls, or before some precious bronze; and one might have supposed him to be taking an inventory, and appraising all the marvels of art and upholstery which decorated this apartment, the most sumptuous in the château.

"And I must renounce all this!" he exclaimed at last. "No, never! never! never! I cannot! I will not!"

Now, Marie-Anne was in a measure enlightened. But still she did not exactly know what was passing in her father's mind. Anxious for information she left the low chair on which she had been sitting and went to his side. "Are you ill, father?" she asked, in her sweetest voice; "what is the matter? What do you fear? Why don't you confide in me—am I not your daughter? Don't you love me any longer?"

At the sound of this dear voice, M. Lacheneur trembled like a sleeper suddenly aroused from the terrors of nightmare, and cast an indescribable glance upon his daughter. "Did you not hear what Chupin said to me?"

he replied slowly. "The Duke de Sairmeuse is at Montaignac—he will soon be here; and we are dwelling in the château of his fathers, and his domain has become ours!"

Marie-Anne was well acquainted with this vexed question of the national lands, a question which agitated France for thirty years, for she had heard it discussed a thousand times. "Ah, well! dear father," said she, "what does that matter, even if we do hold the property? You have bought it and paid for it, haven't you? So it is rightfully and lawfully ours."

M. Lacheneur hesitated a moment before replying. He had a secret which suffocated him; and was in one of those crises in which a man, however strong, totters and seeks for any support however fragile. "You would be right, my daughter," he murmured with drooping head, "if the money I gave in exchange for Sairmeuse had really belonged to me."

At this strange avowal the young girl turned pale and recoiled a step. "What?" she faltered; "the gold wasn't yours, father? Who did it belong to then? where did it come from?"

The unhappy man had gone too far to retract. "I will tell you everything, my dear girl," he replied, "and you shall be my judge. You shall decide everything. When the Sairmeuse family fled from France, I had only my hands to depend upon, and as it was almost impossible to obtain work, I wondered if starvation were not near at hand. Such was my condition when some one came one evening to tell me that Mademoiselle Armande de Sairmeuse, my godmother, was dying, and wished to speak with me. I ran to the château. The messenger had told the truth. Mademoiselle Armande was sick unto death. I felt aware of this when I saw her lying on her bed, whiter than wax. Ah! if I were to live a hundred years, I should never forget the look that was on her face. It seemed to express a determination to hold death at bay until some task on which she had resolved had been performed. When I entered the room she seemed relieved. 'How long you were in coming!' she murmured. I was about to make some excuse, when she motioned me to pause, and ordered her nurses to leave the room. As soon as we were alone, 'You are an honest boy,' said she, 'and I am about to give you a proof of my confidence. People believe me to be poor, but they are mistaken. While my relatives were gaily ruining themselves, I was saving the five hundred louis which the duke allowed me every year.' So saying she motioned me to come nearer, and kneel beside her bed. I obeyed, and then Mademoiselle Armande leant towards me, fixed her lips to my ear, and added: 'I have saved eighty thousand francs.' I felt a sudden giddiness, but my godmother didn't notice it. 'This amount,' she continued, 'is not a quarter of the former income from our family estates. But now, who knows one day it may be the only resource of the Sairmeuses. I am going to place it in your charge, Lacheneur. I confide it to your honour and devotion. The estates belonging to the emigrants are to be sold, I hear. If such an act of injustice is committed, you will probably be able to purchase our property for seventy thousand francs. If the property is sold by the government, purchase it; but if the lands belonging to the emigrants are not sold, take seventy thousand francs to the duke, my nephew, who is with the Count d'Artois. The surplus, that is to say, the ten thousand francs remaining, I give to you—they are yours.' When saying this she seemed to recover her strength. She raised herself up in bed, and holding the crucifix attached to her rosary against my lips, she added, 'Swear by the image of our Saviour, that you will faithfully execute your dying godmother's last will.'

took the required oath, and an expression of satisfaction overspread her features."

M. Lacheneur paused. The recollection of this scene plainly produced a deep impression on his mind. "In continuation," he said, "Mademoiselle Armande, then told me she should die content. 'You will have a protector on high,' she said. 'But this is not all. In times like these, this gold will not be safe in your hands unless those about you are ignorant that you possess it. It is here in this cupboard at the head of my bed, in a small oak chest, which you must manage to remove without being seen. If you went out with it in your arms, people might wonder by-and-by what it contained. The best plan would be to fasten a sheet round it, and let it down gently from the window into the garden. You must then leave the house as you entered it, and as soon as you are outside, you must take the box and carry it home. The night is very dark, and no one will see you, if you are careful. But make haste; my strength is nearly gone.' I did as Mademoiselle Armande suggested, and less than ten minutes afterwards I had lowered the box into the garden without the slightest noise. Closing the window, I exclaimed, 'I have done your bidding godmother.' 'God be praised,' she whispered, 'Sairmeuse is saved!' I heard a deep sigh, and turning round found that she was dead."

M. Lacheneur shuddered as he uttered these last words. His emotion was intense, and for a moment he could not speak. Eventually, in a hollow voice, he exclaimed: "I called for aid—it came. Mademoiselle Armande was loved by every one; there was great lamentation, and half-an-hour of indescribable confusion. I was able to withdraw, unnoticed, to run into the garden, and carry away the box. An hour later, it was concealed in the miserable hovel I inhabited, and the following year I purchased Sairmeuse."

The unfortunate man paused again, he had confessed everything, and now stood trembling in front of his daughter trying to read his sentence in her eyes.

"And can you hesitate?" she asked.

"Ah! you don't know——"

"I know that Sairmeuse must be given up."

This was also the counsel of his own conscience, that faint voice which speaks only in a whisper, but which all the tumult on earth cannot overpower. Still he hesitated. "No one saw me take away the chest," he faltered. "If any one suspected it, there is not a single proof against me. But no one does suspect it."

Marie-Anne rose, her eyes flashing with generous indignation. "Father!" she exclaimed, "Oh! father! If others know nothing about it, can *you* forget it?"

M. Lacheneur did not immediately reply. He seemed to be inwardly wrestling with himself. "Restitution," he at last exclaimed. "Yes, then I will make restitution. I will retribute what I reserved. I will give the duke the eighty thousand francs, with the interest on the amount ever since I have had it in my hands, and then we shall be quits!"

Maria-Anne shook her head. "Why resort to an unworthy subterfuge?" she asked in a gentle voice. "You know perfectly well that Mademoiselle Armande wished to entrust to the servant of her house. And it is Sairmeuse which must be returned."

The word "servant" was revolting to a man, who, at least while the

empire lasted, had been a power in the land. "Ah! Marie, you are cruel," he replied with intense bitterness, "as cruel as a child who has never suffered—as cruel as one who, never having been tempted himself is without mercy for those who have yielded to temptation. You tell me that I was but a trustee, and so indeed I formerly considered myself. If your dear mother were still alive, she would tell you the anxiety and anguish I felt on becoming the master of riches which were not mine. I was afraid of myself. I felt like some gambler to whom the winnings of others have been confided. Your mother could tell you that I moved heaven and earth to find the Duke de Sairmeuse. But he had left the Count d'Artois, and no one knew where he had gone or what had become of him. Ten years passed before I could make up my mind to inhabit the château—yes, ten years—during which I had the furniture dusted each morning as if the master was to return that very evening. At last I ventured. I heard M. d'Escorval declare that the duke had been killed in battle. So I took up my abode here; and day after day as the domain of Sairmeuse grew more productive and extensive under my care, I felt myself more and more its rightful owner."

This fresh plea—this despairing appeal on behalf of a bad cause produced no impression on Marie-Anne's loyal heart. "Restitution must be made," she repeated.

Her father wrung his hands. "Without mercy!" he exclaimed; "she is without mercy. Unfortunate girl! doesn't she understand that it is for her sake I wish to remain where I am. I am old; familiar with toil and poverty; and my hands are still hard and horny. What do I need to keep me alive till the time comes to lay me in the grave-yard? A crust of bread and an onion in the morning, a bowl of soup at night, and a bundle of straw to sleep on. I could easily return to that. But you, unhappy child! and your brother, what will become of you both?"

"We must not discuss nor haggle with duty, father," replied Marie-Anne. "I think, however, that you are needlessly alarmed. I believe the duke is too noble-hearted ever to allow you to want after the immense service you have rendered him."

The former ploughboy of the house of Sairmeuse laughed a loud, bitter laugh. "You believe that!" said he. "Then you don't know the nobles who have been our masters for ages. My only reward will be some callous phrase, 'You're a worthy fellow,' or something of the kind, uttered just for form's sake; and you will see us—me at my plough, and you out at service. And if I venture to speak of the ten thousand francs that were given me, I shall be treated like an impostor or an impudent fool. I swear this shall not be!"

"Oh, father!"

"No! this shall not be. And I realize—as you cannot realize—the disgrace of such a fall. You think you are beloved in Sairmeuse? You are mistaken. We have been too fortunate not to be the victims of hatred and jealousy. If I fall to-morrow, those who kissed your hands yesterday will be ready to tear you to pieces?"

Lacheneur's eyes glittered; he believed he had found a victorious argument. "And then," resumed he, "you, yourself, will realize the horror of the disgrace. It will cost you the deadly anguish of separating from the man your heart has chosen."

At these words Marie-Anne's beautiful eyes filled with tears. "If what you say proves true, father," she murmured, in an altered voice, "I may,

perhaps, die of sorrow ; but I shall have to realize that my confidence and love were misplaced."

"And you still insist upon my returning Sairmeuse to its former owner?"

"Honour demands it, father."

M. Lacheneur struck the chair in which he was seated with a violent blow of his fist. "And if I continue obstinate," he exclaimed—"if I keep the property—what will you do then?"

"I shall say to myself, father, that honest poverty is better than stolen wealth. I shall leave the château, which belongs to the Duke de Sairmeuse, and seek a situation as a servant in the neighbourhood."

M. Lacheneur sank back in his chair sobbing. He knew his daughter's nature well enough to rest assured that she would do what she said. However, he was conquered : Marie-Anne had won the battle, and he had decided to make the heroic sacrifice she asked for.

"I will relinquish Sairmeuse," he faltered, "come what may——"

He paused suddenly, for a visitor had just opened the door unheard, and was now entering the room. The new comer was a young man, twenty or thereabouts, of distinguished mien, but with a rather melancholy and gentle manner. On crossing the threshold his eyes met those of Marie-Anne, and a crimson flush mantled over both their faces.

"Sir," said this young fellow, "my father sends me to inform you that the Duke de Sairmeuse and his son have just arrived. They have asked the hospitality of our curé."

M. Lacheneur rose, unable to conceal his agitation. "You will thank the Baron d'Escorval for his attention, my dear Maurice," he replied. "I shall have the honour of seeing him to-day, after an important step which my daughter and I are about to take."

Young d'Escorval had seen at the first glance that his presence was inopportune, and accordingly he did not linger. But as he was taking leave, Marie-Anne found time and opportunity to say to him in a low voice : "I think I know your heart, Maurice ; this evening I shall know it for certain."

III.

FEW of the inhabitants of Sairmeuse knew, except by name, the terrible duke whose arrival had thrown the whole village into commotion. Some of the oldest residents had a faint recollection of having seen him long ago, before '89 indeed, when he came to visit his aunt, Mademoiselle Armande, though under the monarchy his duties had seldom permitted him to leave the court. If he had given no signs of life during the empire, it was mainly because he had escaped the humiliations and suffering which so many of the emigrants endured in exile. Indeed unlike most of his fellows he had received a princely fortune in exchange for the wealth of which the Revolution had deprived him.

Taking refuge in London after the defeat of the army of Condé, he had been so fortunate as to please the only daughter of one of the richest catholic peers in England, and he had married her. She possessed a dowry of two hundred and fifty thousand pounds sterling, more than six million francs. Still the marriage was not a happy one ; for the chosen companion of the licentious Count d'Artois not unnaturally proved a very indifferent husband. Indeed the young duchess was contemplating a separation when

she died, in giving birth to a little boy, who was baptized under the names of Anne-Marie-Martial.

The loss of his wife did not render the Duke de Sairmeuse inconsolable. He was free and richer than he had ever been. As soon therefore as etiquette permitted, he confided his son to the care of one of his wife's relations and began his roving life again. Rumour had told the truth. He had fought, and fought furiously, against France, first in the Austrian and then in the Russian ranks. And he took no pains to conceal the fact, convinced that he had only performed his duty. He indeed considered that he had honestly and loyally gained the rank of general, granted him by the Emperor of all the Russias.

He had not returned to France during the first Restoration; but his absence had been involuntary. His father-in-law, had just died, and the duke was detained in London by business connected with his son's immense inheritance. Then followed the "Hundred Days," by which he was exasperated. But "the good cause," as he styled it, having triumphed anew, he had at length hastened back to France.

Lacheneur had correctly estimated the character of the former lord of Sairmeuse, when he resisted his daughter's entreaties. The former ploughboy had been compelled to conceal himself during the first Restoration, and he knew only too well, that the returned *émigrés* had learned nothing and forgotten nothing. The Duke de Sairmeuse was no exception to the rule. He thought, and nothing could be more sadly absurd, that a mere act of authority would suffice to suppress forever all the events of the Revolution and the Empire. When any of those who had seen Louis XVIII. at the helm in 1814, assured the duke that France had changed in many respects since 1789, he responded with a shrug of the shoulders: "Nonsense! As soon as we assert ourselves all these rascals whose rebellion alarms you will quietly slink out of sight." And such was really his opinion.

On the road from Montaignac to Sairmeuse, his grace, comfortably ensconced in a corner of his travelling carriage, unfolded his theories for his son's benefit. "The king has been poorly advised," he said. "And indeed I am disposed to believe that he inclines too much to Jacobinism. If he would listen to my advice, he would use the twelve hundred thousand soldiers our friends have placed at his disposal, to bring his subjects to a proper sense of duty. Twelve hundred thousand bayonets have far more eloquence than all the clauses of a charter."

The duke continued his remarks in this strain until the vehicle approached Sairmeuse. Though but little given to sentiment, he was really affected by the sight of the district in which he had been born—where he had played as a child, and of which he had heard nothing since Mademoiselle Armande's death. Though change could be detected on every side, at least the outlines of the landscape remained the same, and the valley of the Oiselle was as bright and smiling as in days gone by.

"I recognize it!" exclaimed his grace with a momentary delight that made him forget politics. "I recognize it!"

Soon the changes became more striking. The vehicle had reached Sairmeuse, and rattled over the stones of the one long street. This street, in former years, had been unpaved, and had always been well nigh impassable in wet weather.

"Ah, ha!" murmured the duke, "this is an improvement!"

It was not long before he noticed others. The dilapidated, thatched hovels of the old régime had given place to pretty, comfortable white

cottages, with green blinds to the windows and vines hanging gracefully over the doors. Soon the church came in view with the white flag of the Bourbons floating according to royal command on the summit of the belfry tower. In the open square facing the house of worship groups of peasants were still engaged in anxious converse.

"What do you think of all these peasants!" enquired the duke's son, the Marquis Martial de Sairmeuse. "Do you think they look like people who are preparing a triumphal reception for their old masters?"

The duke shrugged his shoulders. He was not the man to renounce an illusion for such a trifle. "They don't know that I am in this carriage," he replied. "When they know——" At this very moment loud shouts of "Vive Monseigneur le Duc de Sairmeuse!" interrupted him.

"Do you hear that, marquis?" he exclaimed; and pleased by these cries that proved he was in the right, he leant from the carriage-window, waving his hand to the honest Chupin family, who were running after the vehicle with noisy shouts. The old rascal, his wife, and his sons, all possessed powerful voices; and it was scarcely strange that the duke should believe that the whole village was welcoming him. He was indeed convinced of it; and when the vehicle stopped before the house of the curé, M. de Sairmeuse was firmly persuaded that the popularity of the nobility was even greater then than ever.

Upon the threshold of the parsonage, stood Bibaine, the village priest's old housekeeper. She knew who these guests must be, for a curé's servant always knows everything that is going on. "The curé has not yet returned from church," she said, in reply to the duke's inquiry; "but if the gentlemen would like to wait, it will not be long before he comes, for the poor dear man has not yet lunched."

"Then let us go in," the duke said to his son; and guided by the housekeeper, they entered a small sitting-room which M. de Sairmeuse appraised in a single glance. The aspect of a house reveals the habits of its master. Here everything was poor and bare, though scrupulously clean. The walls were white-washed; eight or ten chairs were ranged around, and the spoons and forks on the clothless table were of common pewter. This abode either belonged to a man of saintly character or one of intense ambition.

"Will these gentlemen take any refreshment?" inquired Bibaine.

"Upon my word," replied Martial, "I must confess that the drive has whetted my appetite amazingly."

"Blessed Jesus!" exclaimed the old housekeeper, in evident despair. "You wish to lunch. What am I to do? I have nothing! That is to say—yes—I have an old hen left in the coop. Give me time to wring its neck, to pick it and clean it——" She paused to listen; footsteps could be heard in the passage. "Ah!" she exclaimed, "here comes our curé!"

The village priest of Sairmeuse, the Abbé Medon as he was called, was the son of a poor farmer in the environs of Montaignac, and owned his Latin and his tonsure to the privations of his family. Tall, angular, and solemn, he was as cold and impassive as a grave-stone.

It was by immense efforts of will, and at the cost of great physical and mental torture that he had made himself what he was. Some idea of the terrible restraint to which he had subjected himself could be formed by looking at his eyes, which occasionally flashed with all the fire of an impassioned soul. Was he old or young? The most subtle observer would have hesitated to answer this question on looking at his pallid emaciated face, cut

in two by an immense nose—a real eagle's beak—as thin as the edge of a razor. He wore a long black robe, patched and darned in numberless places, but without a single spot or stain. This garment hung about his tall attenuated body like the damaged sails around the mast of some disabled ship.

At the sight of two strangers occupying his sitting-room, the village priest manifested some slight surprise. The vehicle standing at the door had announced the presence of some unusual visitor; but neither he nor the sacristan had been notified, and he wondered who he had to deal with, and what was required of him. Mechanically he turned to Bibaine, but the old servant had taken flight.

The duke understood his host's astonishment. "Upon my word, abbé," he said, with the impertinent ease of a great nobleman, who makes himself at home everywhere, "we have taken your house by storm and hold the position, as you see. I am the Duke de Sairmeuse, and this is my son, the marquis."

The priest bowed, but he did not seem very greatly impressed by his guest's exalted rank. "It is a great honour for me," he replied, in a more than reserved tone, "to receive a visit from the former master of this place."

He emphasized this word "former," in such a manner that it was impossible to doubt his sentiments and opinions. "Unfortunately," he continued, "you will not find here the comforts to which you are accustomed, and I fear——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted the duke. "An old soldier is not fastidious, and what suffices for you, Monsieur l'Abbé, will suffice for us. And rest assured that we shall amply repay you in one way or another for any inconvenience we may cause you."

The priest's eye flashed. This want of tact, this disagreeable familiarity, this last insulting remark, kindled the anger of the man concealed beneath the priest.

"Besides," added Martial gaily, "we have been vastly amused by your housekeeper's anxieties, and already know that there is a chicken in the coop——"

"That is to say there was one, Monsieur le Marquis."

The old housekeeper, who suddenly reappeared, explained her master's reply. She seemed overwhelmed with despair. "Holy Virgin! what shall I do?" she clamoured. "The chicken has disappeared. Some one has certainly stolen it for the coop is securely closed!"

"Do not accuse your neighbours hastily," interrupted the curé; "no one has stolen it. Bertrand was here this morning to ask alms for her sick daughter. I had no money, so I gave her the fowl that she might make some good broth for the poor girl."

This explanation changed Bibaine's consternation to fury. Planting herself in the centre of the room, one hand on her hip, and the other pointing at her master, she cried in a loud voice, "That's just the sort of man he is; he hasn't as much sense as a baby! Any miserable peasant who meets him can turn him round his little finger; and the bigger the falsehood the more readily the tears come to his eyes. And that's the way they take the very shoes off his feet and the bread from his mouth. As for Bertrand's daughter she's no more ill than I am!"

"Enough," said the priest sternly, "enough." Then, knowing by experience that his voice would not check her flood of reproaches, he took her by the arm and led her out into the passage.

The Duke de Sairmeuse and his son exchanged a glance of consternation. Was this a comedy prepared for their benefit? Evidently not, since their arrival had been unexpected. But the priest whose character had been so plainly revealed by this domestic quarrel, was not a man to their taste. At least, he was evidently not the man they had hoped to find—the auxiliary whose assistance was indispensable to the success of their plans. Still they did not exchange a word; but listened, waiting for what would follow.

They could hear a discussion in the passage. The master was speaking in low tones, but with an unmistakable accent of command, and the servant uttered an astonished exclamation. No distinct word was, however, audible.

Soon the priest re-entered the sitting-room. "I hope, gentlemen," he said, with a dignity calculated to check any attempt at sarcasm, "that you will excuse this ridiculous scene. The curé of Sairmeuse, thank God, is not so poor as his housekeeper pretends.

Neither the duke nor Martial made any reply. Their earlier assurance was very sensibly diminished; and M. de Sairmeuse deemed it advisable to change the subject. This he did, by relating the events which he had just witnessed in Paris; profiting of the occasion to pretend that his majesty, Louis XVIII., had been welcomed back with enthusiastic transports of affection.

Fortunately, the old housekeeper interrupted this recital. She entered the room, loaded with china, spoons, forks, and bottles, and behind her came a tall man in a white apron, with three or four covered dishes in his hands. It was an order to go and obtain this repast from the village inn that had drawn from Bibaine so many exclamations of wonder and dismay in the passage.

A moment later the curé and his guests took their places at the table. Had the dinner merely consisted of the much-lamented chicken, the rations would have been very "short." Indeed the worthy woman was herself obliged to confess this, on seeing the terrible appetites evinced by M. de Sairmeuse and his son. "One would have sworn that they hadn't eaten anything for a whole fortnight," she told her friends the next day.

The Abbé Midon was apparently not hungry, though it was now two o'clock, and he had eaten nothing since the previous evening. The sudden arrival of the former masters of Sairmeuse filled his heart with gloomy forebodings; and to his mind their coming presaged the greatest misfortunes. So while he played with his knife and fork, pretending to eat, he was really occupied in watching his guests, and in studying them with all a priest's penetration, which, by the way, is generally far superior to that of a physician or a magistrate.

The Duke de Sairmeuse was fifty-seven, but looked considerably younger. The storms of his youth, the dissipation of his riper years, the great excesses of every kind in which he had indulged had failed to impair his iron constitution. Of herculean build, he was extremely proud of his strength, and of his hands, which were well-formed, but large, firmly knit and powerful, such hands as rightfully belonged to a nobleman whose ancestors had dealt many a crushing blow with ponderous battle-axe and two-handed sword in the ancient days of chivalry. His face revealed his character. He possessed all the graces and all the vices of a courtier. He was at the same time witty and ignorant, sceptical as regards religion, and yet violently imbued with the authoritative prejudices of his class.

Though less robust than his father, Martial was quite as distinguished a looking cavalier. Young as he was, barely a man, he had already been the

hero of many a love intrigue, and more than one beauty of renown at foreign courts had been smitten with the soft gleam of his large blue eyes, and the wavy locks of golden hair he inherited from his mother. To his father he owed energy, courage, and, it must also be added, perversity. But he was his superior in education and intellect. If he shared his father's prejudices, he had not adopted them without weighing them carefully. What the father might do in a moment of excitement, the son was capable of doing in cold blood.

It was thus that the abbé, with rare sagacity, read the character of his guests. So it was with sorrow, but without surprise, that he heard the duke advance, on the questions of the day, the impossible ideas that were shared by nearly all the returned *émigrés*. Knowing the condition of the country, and the state of public opinion, the curé endeavoured to convince the obstinate nobleman of his mistake; but upon this subject the duke would not permit contradiction; and he was beginning to lose his temper, when Bibaine opportunely appeared at the parlour door.

"Monsieur le Duc," said she, "M. Lacheneur and his daughter are without and desire to speak to you."

This name of Lacheneur awakened no recollection in the duke's mind. First of all, he had never lived at Sairmeuse. And even if he had, what courtier of the *ancien régime* ever troubled himself about the individual names of his peasantry, whom he regarded with such profound indifference. When a nobleman addressed these people, he exclaimed: "Halloo! hi there! my worthy fellow!"

Hence it was with the air of a man who is making an effort of memory that the Duke de Sairmeuse repeated: "Lacheneur—M. Lacheneur——"

But Martial, a closer observer than his father, had noticed that the priest's glance wavered at the mention of this name.

"Who is this person, abbé?" lightly asked the duke.

"M. Lacheneur," replied the priest with evident hesitation, "is the present owner of the Château de Sairmeuse."

Martial, the precocious diplomat, could not repress a smile on hearing this reply, which he had foreseen. But the duke bounded from his chair. "Ah!" he exclaimed, "it's the rascal who had the impudence—Let him come in, old woman, let him come in."

Bibaine retired, and the priest's uneasiness increased. "Permit me, Monsieur le Duc," he hastily said, "to remark that M. Lacheneur exercises a great influence in this region—to offend him would be impolitic——"

"I understand—you advise me to be conciliatory. Such sentiments are those of a Jacobin. If his majesty listens to the advice of such as you, all these sales of confiscated estates will be ratified. Zounds! our interests are the same. If the Revolution has deprived the nobility of their property, it has also impoverished the clergy."

"The possessions of a priest are not of this world," coldly retorted the curé.

M. de Sairmeuse was about to make some impertinent rejoinder, when M. Lacheneur appeared, followed by his daughter. The wretched man was ghastly pale, great drops of perspiration coursed down his forehead, and his restless, haggard eyes revealed his distress of mind. Marie-Anne was as pale as her father, but her attitude and the light gleaming in her glance spoke of invincible energy and determination.

"Ah, well! friend," said the duke, "so you are the owner of Sairmeuse, it seems."

This was said with such a careless insolence of manner that the curé blushed that a man whom he considered his equal should be thus treated in his house. He rose and offered the visitors chairs. "Will you take a seat, dear Lacheneur?" said he, with a politeness intended as a lesson for the duke; "and you, also, mademoiselle, do me the honour——"

But the father and the daughter both refused the proffered civility with a motion of the head.

"Monsieur le Duc," continued Lacheneur, "I am an old servant of your house——"

"Ah! indeed!"

"Mademoiselle Armande, your aunt, did my poor mother the honour of acting as my godmother——"

"Ah, yes," interrupted the duke, "I remember you now. Our family has shown great kindness to you and yours. And it was to prove your gratitude, probably, that you made haste to purchase our estate!"

The former ploughboy was of humble origin, but his heart and his character had developed with his fortunes; he understood his own worth. Much as he was disliked, and even detested, by his neighbours, every one respected him. And here was a man who treated him with undisguised scorn. Why? By what right? Indignant at the outrage, he made a movement as if to retire. No one, save his daughter, knew the truth; he had only to keep silent, and Sairmeuse remained his. Yes, he had still the power to keep Sairmeuse, and he knew it, for he did not share the fears of the ignorant rustics. He was too well informed not to be able to distinguish between the hopes of the *émigrés* and the reality of their situation.

He knew that to place the returning noblemen perforce in repossession of their ancestral estates would imperil even the existence of the monarchy, despite the presence of all the foreign bayonets. A beseeching word, uttered in a low tone by his daughter, induced him, however, to turn again to the duke. "If I purchased Sairmeuse," he answered, in a voice husky with emotion, "it was in obedience to the command of your dying aunt, and with the money she gave me for that purpose. If you see me here, it is only because I come to restore to you the deposit confided to my keeping."

Any one not belonging to that class of spoiled fools who ordinarily surround a throne would have been deeply touched. But the duke thought this grand act of honesty and generosity the most simple and natural thing in the world.

"That's all very well, so far as the principal is concerned," said he. "But let us speak now of the interest. Sairmeuse, if I remember rightly, yielded an average income of one thousand louis per year. These revenues, well invested, should have amounted to a considerable amount. Where is it?"

This claim, thus advanced and at such a moment, was so outrageous, that Martial, disgusted, made a sign to his father which the latter did not see. But the curé hoping to recall the grasping nobleman to something like a sense of shame, exclaimed: "Monsieur le Duc! Oh, Monsieur le Duc!"

Lacheneur shrugged his shoulders with an air of resignation. "The income I have partly used for my own living expenses, and the education of my children; but most of it has been expended in improving the estate, which to-day yields an income twice as large as in former years."

"That is to say, for twenty years, M. Lacheneur has played the part of lord of the manor. A delightful comedy. You are rich now, I suppose."

"I possess nothing at all. But I hope you will allow me to take ten thousand francs, which your aunt gave me."

"Ah! she gave you ten thousand francs. And when?"

"On the same evening that she gave me the seventy thousand francs intended for the purchase of the estate."

"Perfect! What proof can you furnish that she gave you this sum?"

Lacheneur stood motionless and speechless. He tried to reply, but could not. If he opened his lips it would only be to pour forth a torrent of menace, insult, and invective.

Marie-Anne stepped quickly forward. "The proof, sir," said she, in a clear, ringing voice, "is the word of this man, who, of his own free will, comes to return to you—to give you a fortune."

As she sprang forward, her beautiful dark hair escaped from its confinement, her rich blood crimsoned her cheeks, her dark eyes flashed brilliantly, and sorrow, anger, horror at the humiliation imposed upon her father, imparted a sublime expression to her face. She was so beautiful that Martial gazed at her with absolute wonder. "Lovely!" he murmured in English; "beautiful as an angel!"

These words, which she understood, abashed Marie-Anne. But she had said enough; her father felt that he was avenged. He drew from his pocket a roll of papers and threw them upon the table.

"Here are your titles," he said, addressing the duke in a tone full of implacable hatred. "Keep the legacy your aunt gave me, I wish nothing of yours. I shall never set foot in Sairmeuse again. Penniless I entered it, penniless I will leave it!"

He walked out of the room with head proudly erect, and when they were outside, he merely said to his daughter; "You see, I told you so!"

"You have done your duty," she replied; "it is those who haven't done theirs who are to be pitied!"

She had no opportunity to say any more, for Martial came running after them, anxious for another chance of seeing this girl whose beauty had made such an immediate impression upon his mind. "I hastened after you," he said, addressing Marie-Anne, rather than M. Lacheneur, "to reassure you. All this will be arranged, Mademoiselle. Eyes so beautiful as yours should never know tears. I will be your advocate with my father—"

"Mademoiselle Lacheneur has no need of an advocate!" interrupted a harsh voice.

Martial turned, and saw the young man who that morning had gone to warn M. Lacheneur of the duke's arrival. Accosting him, he exclaimed, in an insolent voice, "I am the Marquis de Sairmeuse."

"And I," said the other quietly, "am Maurice d'Escorval."

They surveyed one another for a moment, each expecting, perhaps, an insult from the other. Instinctively, they felt they were to be enemies; and the glances they exchanged were full of animosity. Perhaps they had a presentiment that they were to be the champions of two different principles, as well as rivals in love.

Martial, remembering his father, yielded. "We shall meet again; M. d'Escorval," he said, as he retired.

At this threat, Maurice shrugged his shoulders, and replied, "You had better not desire it."

IV

THE residence of the Baron d'Escorval, the brick structure with stone dressings, seen from the avenue leading to the Château de Sairmeuse, was small and unpretentious. Its chief attraction was a pretty lawn extending to the banks of the Oiselle in front, and a small but shady park in the rear. It was known as the Château d'Escorval, but such an appellation was a piece of the grossest flattery. Any petty manufacturer who has amassed a small fortune would desire a larger, handsomer, and more imposing structure for his residence.

M. d'Escorval—and history will record the fact to his honour—was not a rich man. Although he had been entrusted with several of those missions from which generals and diplomats often return laden with millions, his worldly possessions only consisted of the little patrimony bequeathed him by his father; a property which yielded an income of from twenty to twenty-five thousand francs a-year. His modest dwelling, situated about a mile from Sairmeuse, represented ten year's savings. He had built it in 1806 from a plan drawn by his own hand, and it was the dearest spot he had on earth. He always hastened to this retreat when work allowed him a little rest, though on this occasion he had not come to Escorval of his own free will, for he had been compelled to leave Paris by the prescription list of July 24—that fatal list which summoned the valiant Ney, the enthusiastic Labédoyère, and the virtuous Drouot before a court-martial.

Even in the seclusion of his country seat, M. d'Escorval's situation was not without danger, for he was one of those who, some days before the disaster of Waterloo, had strongly urged the emperor to order the execution of Fouché, the former minister of police. Now, Fouché knew of this advice; and to-day he was all powerful. Hence, M. d'Escorval's friends wrote to him from Paris to be very careful. But he put his trust in providence, and faced the future, threatening though it was, with the unalterable serenity of a pure conscience.

The baron was still young; he was not yet fifty, but anxiety, work, and long nights passed in struggling with the most arduous difficulties of the imperial policy had aged him before his time. He was tall, slightly inclined to *embonpoint*, and stooped a little. His calm eyes, serious mouth, broad, furrowed forehead, and austere manners at once inspired respect. "He must be stern and inflexible," said those who saw him for the first time. But they were mistaken. If, in the exercise of his official duties, he had always had the strength to resist any temptation to swerve from the right path; if, when duty was at stake, he was as rigid as iron, in private life he was as unassuming as a child, and kind and gentle even to the verge of weakness. To this nobility of character he owed his domestic happiness, that rare boon which after all is the one great treasure of life.

During the bloodiest epoch of the Reign of Terror, M. d'Escorval had saved from the guillotine a young girl, named Victoire-Laure d'Alleu, a distant cousin of the Rhétas of Commarin, as beautiful as an angel, and only three years younger than himself. He loved her—and though she was an orphan, destitute of fortune, he married her, considering the treasure of her

virgin heart of far greater value than the largest dowry. She was an honest woman as her husband was an honest man, in the strictest, most rigorous sense of the word. She was seldom seen at the Tuileries, where M. d'Escorval's worth made him eagerly welcomed. The splendours of the imperial court, outshining even the pomp of the grand Monarque, had no attractions for her. She reserved her grace, beauty, youth, and accomplishments for the adornment of her home. Her husband was everything for her. She lived in him and through him. She had not a thought which did not belong to him; and her happiest hours were those he could spare from his arduous labours to devote to her. And when, in the evening, they sat beside the fire in their modest drawing-room, with their son Maurice playing on the rug at their feet, it seemed to them that they had nothing to wish for here below.

The overthrow of the empire surprised them in the hey-day of happiness. Surprised them? Scarcely. For a long time, M. d'Escorval had seen the prodigious edifice, raised by the genius whom he had made his idol, totter as if about to fall. Certainly, he was troubled by this fall when at last it came, but he was truly heart-broken at beholding all the treason and cowardice which followed it. He was disgusted and horrified at the rising of the sons of mammon, eager to gorge themselves with the spoil. Under these circumstances, exile from Paris seemed an actual blessing; and he remarked to the baroness that in the seclusion of the provinces they would soon be forgotten. In his innermost heart, however, he was not without misgivings—misgivings shared by his wife, who trembled for her husband's safety, although to spare him all alarm she strove to preserve a placid countenance.

On this first Sunday in August, M. and Madame d'Escorval had been unusually sad. A vague presentiment of approaching misfortune weighed heavily upon their hearts. At the moment when Lacheneur presented himself at the parsonage they were sitting on the terrace in front of their house, gazing anxiously at the roads leading from Escorval to the château, and to the village of Sairmeuse. Apprized that same morning of the duke's arrival by his friends at Montaignac, the baron had sent his son to warn M. Lacheneur. He had requested him to return as soon as possible; and yet the hours were rolling by, and Maurice had not returned.

"What if something has happened to him!" thought the anxious parents.

No, at that moment nothing had happened to him. Though a word from Mademoiselle Lacheneur had sufficed to make him forget his usual deference to his father's wishes. "This evening," she had said, "I shall certainly know your heart." What could this mean? Could she doubt him? Tortured by anxieties, he could not make up his mind to go home again without having had an explanation, and he loitered near the château hoping that Marie-Anne would reappear.

She did reappear at last, but leaning on her father's arm. Young d'Escorval followed them at a distance, and soon saw them enter the parsonage. What they wanted there he couldn't guess though he knew that the duke and his son were inside. The time that the Lacheneurs remained in the Abbé Midon's house seemed a century to Maurice, who paced restlessly up and down the market place. At last, however, Marie-Anne and her father reappeared, and he was about to join them when he was prevented by the appearance of Martial, whose promises he overheard.

Maurice knew nothing of life; he was as innocent as a child, but he could not mistake the intentions that had dictated the step taken by the Marquis de Sairmeuse. At the thought that a libertine's caprice should for an instant

rest on the pure and beautiful girl he loved with all the strength of his being—the girl he had sworn should be his wife—all his blood mounted madly to his brain. He felt a wild longing to chastise the marquis; but fortunately—unfortunately, perhaps—his hand was stayed by the recollection of a phrase he had heard his father repeat a thousand times: “Calmness and irony are the only weapons worthy of the strong.” And at the remembrance of these words he acquired sufficient strength of will to appear calm, though in reality he was beside himself with passion.

“Ah! I will find you again,” he repeated, however, through his set teeth as he watched his enemy move away. He then turned and discovered that Marie-Anne and her father had left him. He saw them standing about a hundred yards off, and although he was surprised at their indifference, he made haste to join them, and addressed himself to M. Lacheneur.

“We are just going to your father’s house,” was the only reply he received, and this in an almost ferocious tone.

A glance from Marie-Anne commanded silence. He obeyed, and walked a few steps behind them, his head bowed upon his breast, terribly anxious, and vainly seeking to explain to himself what had taken place. His manner betrayed such intense grief that his mother divined a misfortune as soon as she caught sight of him.

All the anguish which this courageous woman had hidden for a month, found utterance in a single cry. “Ah! here is misfortune!” said she: “we shall not escape it.”

It was indeed misfortune. One could no longer doubt it on seeing M. Lacheneur enter the drawing-room. He walked with the heavy and uncertain step of a drunken man; his eyes were void of expression, his features were distorted and his lips trembled.

“What has happened?” eagerly asked the baron.

But the whilom proprietor of Sairmeuse did not seem to hear him. “Ah! I warned her,” he murmured, continuing a monologue he had begun before entering the room. “Yes, I told my daughter so.”

Madame d’Escorval, after kissing Marie-Anne, drew the girl towards her. “What has happened? For heaven’s sake tell me what has happened!” she exclaimed.

With a gesture of resignation, the girl motioned her to look at M. Lacheneur, and listen to him.

The latter seemed to wake up; he passed his hand across his forehead and wiped away the moisture from his eyes. “It is only this, M. le Baron,” said he in a harsh, unnatural voice: “I rose this morning the richest landowner in the district, and I shall lie down to-night poorer than the poorest beggar in Sairmeuse. I had everything; and now I have nothing, nothing but my two hands. They earned me my bread for twenty-five years; they will earn it for me now until the day of my death. I had a beautiful dream; it is over.”

In presence of this outburst of despair, M. d’Escorval turned pale. “You must exaggerate your misfortune,” he faltered; “explain what has happened.”

Unconscious of what he was doing, M. Lacheneur threw his hat upon a chair, and flinging back his long, gray hair, he said: “To you I will tell everything. I came here for that purpose. I know you: I know your heart. And have you not done me the honour to call me your friend?”

Then, without omitting a detail he related the scene which had just taken place at the parsonage. The baron listened with intense astonishment, almost doubting the evidence of his own senses; while Madame d’Escorval’s

indignant exclamations showed that she was utterly revolted by such injustice.

But there was one listener, whom Marie-Anne alone observed, who was most intensely moved by Lacheneur's narrative. This listener was Maurice. Leaning against the door, pale as death, he tried in vain to repress the tears of rage and grief which rushed to his eyes. To insult Lacheneur was to insult Marie-Anne—that is to say, to injure, to outrage him in what he held dearest in the world. Had Martial now been within his reach he would certainly have paid dearly for the insults heaped on the father of the girl that Maurice loved. However, young d'Escorval swore that the chastisement he contemplated was only deferred—that it should surely come. And it was not mere angry boasting. This young man, so modest and gentle in manner, had albeit a heart that was inaccessible to fear. His beautiful, dark eyes, which usually had the trembling timidity of a girl's could meet an enemy's gaze without flinching.

When M. Lacheneur had repeated the last words he addressed to the Duke de Sairmeuse, M. d'Escorval offered him his hand. "I have told you already that I was your friend," he said, in a voice faltering with emotion; "but I must tell you to-day that I am proud of having such a friend as you."

Lacheneur trembled at the touch of the loyal hand which clasped his so warmly, and his face betrayed his inward satisfaction.

"If my father had not returned the estate," obstinately murmured Marie-Anne, "he would have been an unfaithful guardian—a thief. He has only done his duty."

M. d'Escorval turned to the young girl a little surprised. "You speak the truth, mademoiselle," he said, reproachfully; "but when you are as old as I am, and have had my experience, you will know that the accomplishment of a duty is, under certain circumstances, an act of heroism of which only few persons are capable."

M. Lacheneur exclaimed warmly to his friend, "Ah! your words do me good. Now, I am glad of what I have done."

The baroness rose, too much a woman to know how to resist the generous dictates of her heart. "And I, also, Lacheneur," said she, "desire to press your hand. I wish to tell you that I esteem you as much as I despise those who have tried to humiliate you, when they should have fallen at your feet. They are heartless monsters, and I don't believe the like of them are to be found on earth."

"Alas!" sighed the baron, "the allies have brought back plenty of others who, like the Sairmeuses, think that the world was created exclusively for their benefit."

"And yet these people wish to be our masters," growled Lacheneur.

By some strange fatality no one chanced to hear this last remark. Had it been overheard, and had the speaker been questioned, he would probably have disclosed some of the projects just forming in his mind; and then many disastrous consequences might have been averted.

M. d'Escorval had now regained his usual coolness. "Now, my dear friend," he asked, "what course do you propose to pursue with these members of the Sairmeuse family?"

"They will hear nothing more from me—for some time at least."

"What! Shall you not claim the ten thousand francs they owe you?"

"I shall ask them for nothing."

"You will be compelled to do so. Since you have alluded to the legacy,

your own honour requires that you should insist upon its payment by all legal means. There are still judges in France."

M. Lacheneur shook his head. "The judges will not grant me the justice I desire. I shall not apply to them."

"But——"

"No, no. I wish to have nothing more to do with these men. I shall not even go to the château to remove either my own clothes or my daughter's. If they send them to us—very well. If they like to keep them so much the better. The more shameful, infamous, and odious their conduct the better I shall be satisfied."

The baron made no reply; but his wife spoke, believing that she had a sure means of conquering this incomprehensible obstinacy. "I could understand your determination if you were alone in the world," said she, "but you have children."

"My son is eighteen, madame; he is in good health and has had an excellent education. He can make his own way in Paris if he chooses to remain there."

"But your daughter?"

"Marie-Anne will remain with me."

M. d'Escorval thought it is his duty to interfere. "Take care, my dear friend, that your grief doesn't tamper with your reason," said he. "Reflect? What will become of you—your daughter and yourself?"

Lacheneur smiled sadly. "Oh," he replied, "we are not as destitute as I said. I exaggerated our misfortune. We are still landowners. Last year an old cousin, whom I could never induce to come and live with us at Sairmeuse, died, and left everything she had to Marie-Anne; so we've still got a poor little cottage near La Rèche, with a little garden and a few acres of barren land. In compliance with my daughter's entreaties, I repaired the cottage, and furnished it with a table, some chairs, and a couple of beds. It was then intended as a home for old Father Guvat and his wife. And in the midst of my wealth and luxury, I said to myself: 'How comfortable those two old people will be there.' Well, what I thought so comfortable for others, will be good enough for me now. I can raise vegetables, and Marie-Anne shall sell them."

Was he speaking seriously? Maurice must have supposed so, for he sprang forward. "This shall not be, Lacheneur!" he exclaimed.

"What?"

"No, this shall not be, for I love Marie-Anne, and I ask you to give her to me for my wife."

Maurice and Marie-Anne's affection for each other did not date from yesterday. As children they had played together in the parks of Sairmeuse and Escorval. They had shared many a butterfly hunt, and many a search for pebbles on the river banks; and oftentimes had they rolled in the hay while their mothers sauntered through the meadows bordering the Oiselle.

For their mothers were friends. Madame Lacheneur had been reared like most poor peasant girls; that is to say, on her marriage day she only succeeded with great difficulty in inscribing her name upon the register. But from her husband's example she learnt that prosperity, as well as noble lineage, entails numerous obligations; hence with rare courage, crowned with still rarer success, she undertook to acquire an education in keeping with her rank and fortune. And the baroness made no effort to resist the feelings of sympathy which led her towards this meritorious young woman, in whom it was easy to discern a mind of many natural gifts, and a nature

which despite low birth was instructively refined. When Madame Lacheneur died, Madame d'Escorval mourned for her as she would have mourned for a favourite sister.

From that moment Maurice's attachment assumed a more serious character. Educated at a college in Paris, his masters sometimes complained of his want of application. "If your professors are not satisfied with you," said his mother, "you shall not go to Escorval for the holidays, and then you will not see your friend." Now this simple threat always sufficed to make the school-boy resume his studies with redoubled diligence. So each succeeding year strengthened as it were the love which preserved Maurice from the restlessness and errors of youth.

The two children were equally timid and artless, and equally infatuated with each other. Long walks in the twilight under their parent's eyes, a glance that revealed their delight at meeting, flowers exchanged between them and religiously preserved—such were their simple pleasures. That magical word, love—so sweet to utter, and so sweet to hear—had never once dropped from their lips. Maurice's audacity had never gone beyond a furtive pressure of the hand.

The parents could not be ignorant of this mutual affection; and if they pretended to shut their eyes, it was only because it neither displeased them nor disturbed their plans. M. and Madame d'Escorval saw no objection to their son's marriage with a girl whose nobility of character they appreciated, and who was as beautiful as she was good. That she was the richest heiress in the province, was naturally no objection. So far as M. Lacheneur was concerned, he was delighted at the prospect of a marriage which would ally him, a former ploughboy, with an old and generally respected family. Hence although the subject had never been directly alluded to either by the baron or Lacheneur, there was withal a tacit agreement between the two families. Indeed the marriage was considered as a forgone conclusion.

And yet Maurice's impetuous unexpected declaration struck every one dumb. In spite of his agitation, the young man perceived the effect his words had produced, and frightened by his own boldness, he turned towards his father with a look of interrogation. The baron's face was grave, even sad; but his attitude expressed no displeasure.

This gave renewed courage to the anxious lover. "You will excuse me," he said, addressing Lacheneur, "for presenting my request in such a manner, and at such a time. But surely it is at the moment when misfortune overtakes one that true friends should declare themselves, and deem themselves fortunate if their devotion can obliterate the remembrance of such infamous treatment as that to which you have been subjected."

As he spoke, he was watching Marie-Anne. Blushing and embarrassed, she turned away her head, perhaps to conceal the tears which gushed forth from her eyes—tears of joy and gratitude. The love of the man she worshipped had come forth victorious from a test which many heiresses might in vain resort to. Now could she truly say that she knew Maurice's heart.

Maurice speedily continued: "I have not consulted my father, sir; but I know his affection for me and his esteem for you. When the happiness of my life is at stake he will not oppose me. He, who married my dear mother without a dowry, must understand my feelings."

With these words Maurice paused, awaiting the verdict.

"I approve your course, my son," said M. d'Escorval, deeply affected; "you have behaved like an honourable man. Certainly you are very young to become the head of a family; but, as you say, circumstances demand it."

Then turning to M. Lacheneur, he added : " My dear friend, on my son's behalf I ask you for your daughter's hand in marriage."

Maurice had not expected so little opposition. In his delight he was almost tempted to bless the hateful Duke de Sairmeuse, to whom he would owe his future happiness. He sprang towards his father, and seizing his hands, he raised them to his lips, faltering : " Thanks !—you are so good ! I love you so ! Oh, how happy I am !"

Unfortunately, the poor boy's joy was premature. A gleam of pride flashed in M. Lacheneur's eyes ; but his face soon resumed its gloomy expression. " Believe me, M. le Baron," said he, " I am deeply touched by what you and your son have said—yes, deeply touched. You wish to make me forget my humiliation ; but for this very reason, I should be the most contemptible of men if I did not refuse the great honour you desire to confer upon my daughter."

" What !" exclaimed the baron in utter astonishment ; " you refuse?"

" I am compelled to do so."

Although momentarily thunderstruck, Maurice soon renewed the attack with an energy no one had ever suspected in his character. " Do you wish to ruin my life, to ruin *our* life," he exclaimed ; " for if I love Marie-Anne, she also loves me."

It was easy to see that he spoke the truth. The unhappy girl, crimson with happy blushes a moment earlier, had now turned as white as marble and glanced imploringly towards her father.

" It cannot be," repeated M. Lacheneur ; " and the day will arrive when you will bless the decision I have come to."

Alarmed by her son's evident dismay, Madame d'Escorval interposed : " You must have reasons for this refusal," said she.

" None that I can disclose, madame. But as long as I can prevent it, my daughter shall never be your son's wife."

" Ah ! it will kill my child !" exclaimed the baroness.

M. Lacheneur shook his head. " M. Maurice," said he, " is young ; he will soon console himself—and forget."

" Never !" interrupted the unhappy lover—" never !"

" And your daughter?" inquired the baroness.

Ah ! this was the weak spot in Lacheneur's armour : a mother's instinct had prompted the baroness's last words. The whilom lord of Sairmeuse hesitated for a moment, and it was not without a struggle that his will gained the mastery over his heart : " Marie-Anne," he replied slowly, " knows her duty too well not to obey me. When I have told her the motive that governs my conduct she will resign herself and if she suffers, she will know how to conceal her sufferings."

He suddenly paused. In the distance a report of musketry could be plainly heard. Each face grew paler : for circumstances imparted to these sounds an ominous significance with anxious hearts. Both M. d'Escorval and Lacheneur sprang out upon the terrace. But everything was silent again. Far as the horizon stretched, nothing unusual could be discerned. The limpidity of the azure sky was unimpaired, and not the faintest cloud-let of smoke rose above the trees.

" It is the enemy," muttered M. Lacheneur in a tone which told how gladly he would have shouldered his gun and with five hundred others marched against the allies.

He paused. The reports were repeated with still greater violence, and for five minutes or so succeeded each other without cessation. It seemed even as if some pieces of artillery had been discharged.

M. d'Escorval listened with knitted brows. "This is very strange; but yet it is scarcely the fire of a regular engagement," he murmured.

To remain any longer in such a state of uncertainty was out of the question. "If you will allow me, father," ventured Maurice, "I will try and ascertain—"

"Go," replied the baron quietly; "but if there should be anything, which I doubt, don't expose yourself to useless danger, but return."

"Oh! be prudent!" nervously insisted Madame d'Escorval, who already saw her son exposed to peril.

"Be prudent!" also entreated Marie-Anne, who alone understood the attraction that danger might have for a lover in despair.

These cautions were unnecessary. As Maurice was rushing to the gate, his father stopped him.

"Wait," said he, "here comes some one who may, perhaps, be able to enlighten us."

A peasant was passing along the road leading from Sairmeuse. He was walking bareheaded and with hurried strides in the middle of the dusty highway, brandishing his stick as if soon to threaten some invisible enemy, and he came near enough for the party on the terrace to distinguish his features.

"Ah! it's Chanlouineau!" exclaimed M. Lacheneur.

"The owner of the vineyards on the Borderie?"

"The same! The best looking young farmer in the district, and the best in heart as well. Ah! he has good blood in his veins; we may well be proud of him."

"Ask him to stop," said M. d'Escorval.

"Ah! Chanlouineau!" shouted Lacheneur, leaning over the balustrade. The young farmer raised his head.

"Come up here," resumed Lacheneur; "the baron wishes to speak with you."

Chanlouineau replied by a gesture of assent, and opening the garden gate soon crossed the lawn. He had a furious look in his face, and the state of his clothes showed plainly enough that he had been fighting. He had lost his collar and necktie, and the muscles of his neck were swollen as if by the pressure of some vigorous hand.

"What's going on?" eagerly asked Lacheneur. "Is there a battle?"

"Oh, there's no battle," replied the young farmer, with a nervous laugh.

"The firing you hear is in honour of the Duke de Sairmeuse."

"What!"

"Oh, it's the truth. It's all the work of that scoundrel, Chupin. If ever he comes within reach of my arm again, he will never steal any more."

M. Lacheneur was confounded. "Tell us what has happened," he said, excitedly.

"Oh, it's simple enough. When the duke arrived at Sairmeuse, Chupin, with his two rascally boys, and that old hag, his wife, ran after the carriage like beggars after a diligence, crying, 'Vive Monseigneur le Duc!' The duke was delighted, for he no doubt expected a volley of stones, so he gave each of the wretches a five franc piece. This money abetted Chupin's appetite, so he took it into his head to give the duke such a reception as was given the emperor. Having learnt from Bibaine, whose tongue is as long as a viper's, everything that had occurred at the parsonage between the duke and you, M. Lacheneur, he came and proclaimed the news on the market-place. When the fools heard it, all those who had purchased national

lands got frightened. Chupin had counted on this, and soon he began telling the poor fools that they must burn powder under the duke's nose if they wished him to confirm their titles to their property."

"And did they believe him?"

"Implicitly. It didn't take them long to make their preparations. They went to the *mairie* and took the firemen's muskets, and the guns used for firing salutes on fête days; the mayor gave them powder, and then you heard the result. When I left Sairmeuse there was more than two hundred idiots in front of the parsonage shouting, 'Vive Monseigneur! Vive le Duc de Sairmeuse!' at the top of their voices."

"The same pitiful farce that was played in Paris, only on a smaller scale," murmured the baron d'Escorval. "Avarice and human cowardice are the same all the world over."

Meanwhile, Chanlouineau was proceeding with his narrative. "To make the fête complete, the devil must have warned all the nobility of the district, for they all hastened to the spot. They say that M. de Sairmeuse is the king's favourite, and that he can do just as he pleases. So you may imagine how they all greeted him! I'm only a poor peasant, but I'd never lie down in the dust before any man like these old nobles, who are so haughty with us, did before the duke. They even kissed his hands, and he allowed them to do so. He walked about the square with the Marquis de Courtornieu—"

"And his son?" interrupted Maurice.

"The Marquis Martial, eh? Oh, he was also strutting about with Made-moiselle Blanche de Courtornieu on his arm. Ah! I can't understand how people can call her pretty—a little bit of a thing, so blonde that one might almost take her hair for white. Ah, they did laugh those two and poke fun at the peasants into the bargain. Some of the villagers say they are going to be married. And even this evening there's to be a banquet at the Château de Courtornieu in the duke's honour."

"You've only forgotten one thing," said M. Lacheneur when Chanlouineau paused. "How is it your clothes are torn, it seems as if you'd been fighting."

The young farmer hesitated for a moment, and it was with evident reluctance that he replied: "I can tell you all the same. While Chupin was preaching, I preached as well, but not in the same strain. The scoundrel reported me. So, in crossing the square, the duke stopped before me and remarked: 'So you are an evil disposed person?' I said I wasn't though I knew my rights. Then he took me by the coat and shook me, and told me he'd cure me and take possession of *his* vineyard again. The deuce! When I felt the old rascal's hand on me my blood boiled. I pinioned him. But six or seven men fell on me, and compelled me to let him go. But he had better make up his mind not to come prowling about my vineyard!"

The young farmer clenched his hands, and his eyes flashed ominously; he evidently had an intense thirst for vengeance. M. d'Escorval remained silent, fearing to aggravate this hatred, so imprudently kindled, and the explosion of which might have terrible results.

M. Lacheneur had risen from his chair. "I must go and take possession of my cottage," he remarked to Chanlouineau; "will you accompany me? I have a proposal to make to you."

M. and Madame d'Escorval endeavoured to detain him, but he would not allow himself to be persuaded, and a minute later, he, his daughter, and Chanlouineau had taken their departure. However, Maurice did not despair,

for Marie-Anne had promised to meet him on the following day in the pine grove near La Réche.

Chanlouineau had correctly reported the reception which the villagers of Sairmeuse had given to the duke. The artful Chupin had found a sure means of kindling a semblance of enthusiasm among the callous, calculating peasants who were his neighbours.

He was a dangerous fellow this old poacher and farm-yard thief. Shrewd he always was ; cautious and pathetic when necessary ; bold as those who possess nothing can afford to be ; in short, one of the most consummate scoundrels that ever breathed. The peasants feared him, and yet they had no conception of his real character. All the resources of his mind had hitherto been expended in evading the provisions of the rural code. To save himself from falling into the hands of the gendarmes, to steal a few sacks of wheat without detection, he had expended talents of intrigue which would have sufficed to make the fortune of twenty diplomats. Circumstances, as he always said, had been against him. Hence, he desperately caught at the first and only opportunity worthy of his genius that had ever presented itself.

Of course, the wily rustic told his fellow-villagers nothing of the true circumstances which had attended the restoration of Sairmeuse to its former owner. From him the peasants only learned the bare fact ; and the news spread rapidly from group to group. "M. Lacheneur has given up Sairmeuse," said Chupin. "Château, forests, vineyards, fields—he surrenders everything."

This was enough, and more than enough, to terrify every landowner in the village. If Lacheneur, this man who was so powerful in their eyes, considered the danger so threatening that he deemed it necessary or advisable to make a complete surrender, what was to become of them—poor devils—without aid, without counsel, without defence ? They were told that the government was about to betray their interests ; that a decree was in process of preparation which would render their title-deeds worthless. They could see no hope of salvation, except through the duke's generosity—that generosity which Chupin painted with the glowing colours of a rainbow.

When a man is not strong enough to weather the gale, he must bow like the reed before it, and rise again after the storm has passed ; to this conclusion the frightened peasantry came. Accordingly they bowed. And their apparent enthusiasm was all the more vociferous, on account of the rage and fear that filled their hearts. A close observer would have detected an under-current of anger and menace in their shouts ; and in point of fact each villager murmured to himself : "What do we risk by crying, "Vive le duc ?" Nothing, absolutely nothing. If he's satisfied with that as a compensation for his lost property—all well and good ! If he isn't satisfied we shall have time by-and-bye to adopt other measures." Hence they all shouted themselves hoarse.

And while the duke was sipping his coffee in the curé's little sitting-room, he expressed his lively satisfaction at the scene outside. He, this great lord of times gone by ; this unconquerable, incorrigible man of absurd prejudices and obstinate illusions accepted these acclamations as if they had been *bona-fide*. Without the least semblance of doubt he blandly mistook the counterfeit coin for genuine money. "How you have deceived me, to be sure," he said to the Abbé Midon ; "How could you declare that your people were unfavourably disposed towards us ?"

The Abbé Midon was silent. What could he reply? He could not understand this sudden revolution in public opinion—this abrupt change from gloom and discontent to excessive gaiety. Something must have transpired of which he was not aware. Somebody must have been at work among the peasantry.

It was not long before it became apparent who that somebody was. Emboldened by his success outside, Chupin ventured to present himself at the parsonage. He entered the sitting-room, scraping and cringing, his back bent double, and an obsequious smile upon his lips. He came as an ambassador, he declared, with numerous protestations of respect, he came to implore "monseigneur" to show himself upon the market-place.

"Ah, well—yes," exclaimed the duke, rising from his seat; "yes, I will yield to the wishes of these good people. Follow me, marquis!"

As the duke appeared on the threshold of the parsonage, a loud shout rent the air; a score of muskets blazed away, and the old salute guns belched forth smoke and fire. Never had Sairmeuse heard such a salvo of artillery; and the shock of the report shattered three windows at the inn of the Bœuf Couronné.

The Duke de Sairmeuse knew how to preserve an appearance of haughty indifference. Any display of emotion was in his opinion vulgar; but in reality he was perfectly delighted, so delighted that he desired to reward his welcomers. A glance over the deeds handed him by Lacheneur had shown him that Sairmeuse had been restored to him virtually intact. The portions of the immense domain which had been detached and sold separately were after all of little importance. Now, the duke already schooled in a measure by his son, thought it would be politic, and at the same time inexpensive, to abandon all claim to these few acres, now shared by forty or fifty peasants.

"My friends," he exclaimed in a loud voice, "I renounce, for myself and for my descendants, all claim to the lands belonging to my house which you have purchased. They are yours—I give them to you!"

By this absurd semblance of a gift, M. de Sairmeuse thought to add the finishing touch to his popularity. A great mistake! It simply assured the popularity of Chupin, the organizer of the farce. While the duke was promenading through the crowd with a proud and self-satisfied air, the peasants, despite their seemingly respectful attitude, were secretly laughing and jeering at him. And if they promptly took his part against Chanlouineau, it was only because his gift was still fresh in their minds; except for this his grace might have fared badly indeed.

The duke, however, had but little time to think of this encounter, which produced a vivid impression on his son. One of his former companions in exile, the Marquis de Courtornieu, whom he had informed of his arrival, now appeared on the place, and hastened to welcome him. The marquis was accompanied by his daughter, Mademoiselle Blanche. Martial could not do otherwise than offer his arm to the daughter of his father's friend; and the young couple took a leisurely promenade under the shade of the lofty trees, while the duke renewed his acquaintance with all the nobility of the neighbourhood.

There was not a single nobleman who did not hasten to press the Duke de Sairmeuse's hand. First, he possessed, it was said, an estate in England valued at more than twenty millions of francs. Then, he was the king's favourite, and each member of the local aristocracy had some favour to ask for himself, his relatives, or friends. Poor king! If he had had twenty

kingdoms of France to divide like a cake between all these cormorants, he would yet have failed to satisfy their voracious appetites.

That evening, after a grand banquet at the Château de Courtornieu, the duke slept at the Château de Sairmeuse, in the room which had been so lately occupied by Lacheneur. He was gay, chatty, and full of confidence in the future.

"I'm like Louis XVIII. in Bonaparte's bedroom," he said to his son in a jocular tone; then adding with a shade of sentiment, "Ah! it's good to be in one's own house again!"

But Martial only tendered a mechanical reply. His mind was occupied in thinking of two women, who had made a deep impression on his heart that day. He was thinking of two girls so utterly unlike—Blanche de Courtornieu and Marie-Anne Lacheneur.

V.

ONLY those who, in the bright spring-time of life, have loved, and been loved in return, who have suddenly seen an impassable gulf open between them and their future happiness, can realise Maurice d'Escorval's disappointment. All the dreams of his life, all his future plans, were based upon his love for Marie-Anne. If this love failed him, the enchanted castle which hope had erected would crumble and fall, burying him beneath its ruins. Without Marie-Anne he saw neither aim nor motive in existence. Still he did not suffer himself to be deluded by false hopes. Although at first his appointed meeting with Marie-Anne on the following day seemed salvation itself, on reflection he was forced to admit that this interview could bring no change, since everything depended upon the will of a third person, M. Lacheneur.

Maurice spent the remainder of Sunday in mournful silence. Dinner time came; and he took his seat at the table, but it was impossible for him to eat, and he soon requested his parent's permission to withdraw. M. d'Escorval and the baroness exchanged sorrowful glances, but did not offer any comment. They respected his grief; knowing that a sorrow such as his would only be aggravated by any attempt at consolation.

"Poor Maurice!" murmured Madame d'Escorval, as soon as her son had left the room. "Perhaps it will not be prudent for us to leave him entirely to the dictates of despair."

The baron shuddered. He divined only too well his wife's sad apprehensions. "We have nothing to fear," he replied quickly; "I heard Marie-Anne promise to meet Maurice to-morrow in the grove near La Rèche."

The baroness, who in her anxiety had momentarily dreaded lest Maurice might commit suicide, now breathed more freely. Still she was a mother, and her husband's assurances did not completely satisfy her. She hastily went up stairs, softly opened the door of her son's room and looked in.

He was so engrossed in gloomy thought that he neither heard her nor even for an instant suspected the presence of the anxious mother who was fondly watching over him. He was sitting at the window, his elbows resting on the sill, and his head between his hands. There was no moon, but the night was clear, and over and beyond the light fog which indicated the course of the Oiselle, rose the towers and turrets of the massive Château de Sairmeuse. More than once had Maurice sat silently gazing at this stately pile, which sheltered all that he held dearest and most precious in the world.

From his windows Marie-Anne's casement could be perceived, and the throbbing of his heart would quicken whenever he saw it lighted up. "She is there," he would think, "in her virgin chamber. She is praying on her bended knees, and she murmurs my name after her father's, imploring heaven's blessing upon us both."

But this evening Maurice was not waiting for a light to gleam through the panes of that dear window. Marie-Anne was no longer at Sairmeuse—she had been driven away. Where was she now? She, accustomed to all the luxury that wealth could procure, no longer had any home save a poor thatch-roofed hovel, the walls of which were not even white-washed, and whose only floor was the earth itself, dusty as the public highway in summer, and frozen or muddy in winter. She was reduced to the necessity of occupying herself the humble abode which, in her charitable heart, she had intended as an asylum for one of her pensioners. What was she doing now? Doubtless she was weeping; and at this thought poor Maurice felt heart-broken.

What was his surprise, a little after midnight, to see the château brilliantly illuminated. The duke and his son had repaired there after the banquet given by the Marquis de Courtornieu; and before going to bed, they made a tour of inspection through their ancestral abode. M. de Sairmeuse had not crossed its threshold for two-and-twenty years, and Martial had never seen it in his life. Maurice could see the lights leap from storey to storey, from casement to casement, until at last even Marie-Anne's windows were illuminated.

At this sight, the unhappy youth could not restrain a cry of rage. These men, these strangers, dared to enter this virgin bower which he, even in thought, scarcely ventured to picture. No doubt they trampled carelessly over the delicate carpet with their heavy boots, and Maurice trembled to think of the liberties which, in their insolent familiarity, they might perhaps venture to take. He fancied he could see them examining and handling the thousand petty trifles with which young girls love to surround themselves, impudently opening the drawers and perhaps inquisitively reading an unfinished letter lying on the writing-desk. Never until this night had Maurice supposed it possible to hate any one, as now he hated these two men.

At last, in despair, he threw himself on to his bed, and passed the remainder of the night in thinking over what he should say to Marie-Anne on the morrow, and in seeking for some means to remove the difficulties obstructing his path to happiness. He rose at daybreak and spent the early morning wandering about the park, fearing and yet longing for the hour that would decide his fate. Madame d'Escorval was obliged to exert all her authority to make him take some food, for he had quite forgotten that he had spent twenty-four hours without eating. At last, when eleven o'clock struck, he left the house.

The lands of La Rèche are situated across the Oiselle, and Maurice to reach his destination had to take a ferry a short distance from his home. As he approached the river-bank, he perceived six or seven peasants who were waiting to cross. They were talking in a loud voice, and did not notice young d'Escorval as he drew near them.

"It is certainly true," Maurice heard one of the men say. "I heard it from Chanlouineau himself only last evening. He was wild with delight. 'I invite you all to the wedding!' he cried. 'I am betrothed to M. Lacheneur's daughter; the affair's decided.'"

Maurice was well-nigh stunned by this astounding news, and he was actually unable to think or to move.

"Besides," he heard the same man say, "Chanlouineau's been in love with her for a long time. Every one knows that. Haven't you ever noticed his eyes when he met her—red-hot coals were nothing to them. But while her father was so rich, he didn't dare speak. However now that the old man has met with this trouble, he has ventured to offer himself, and is accepted."

"An unfortunate thing for him," remarked one of the listeners.

"Why so?"

"If M. Lacheneur is ruined as they say——"

The others laughed heartily. "Ruined—M. Lacheneur!" they exclaimed in chorus. "How absurd! He's richer than all of us put together. Do you suppose he's been stupid enough not to put anything by during all these years? He hasn't put his money in ground, as he pretends, but somewhere else."

"What you are saying is untrue!" interrupted Maurice, indignantly. "M. Lacheneur left Sairmeuse as poor as he entered it."

On recognizing M. d'Escorval's son, the peasants became extremely cautious; and to all his questions they would only give vague unsatisfactory answers. A Sairmeuse rustic is usually so dreadfully afraid of compromising himself that he will never give a frank reply to a question if he has the slightest reason to suspect that his answer might displease his questioner. However, what Maurice had heard before sufficed to fill his heart with doubt. Directly he had crossed the Oiselle, he pushed on rapidly towards La Rèche, murmuring as he went: "What! Marie-Anne marry Chanlouineau? No; that cannot be. It is impossible!"

The spot termed La Rèche—literally the Waste—where Marie-Anne had promised to meet Maurice, owed its name to the rebellious sterile nature of its soil. It seems to have been cursed by nature. Boulders strew the sandy surface, and vain indeed had been all the attempts at culture. It is only here and there among the broom that a few stunted oaks with straggling branches manage to exist. But at the edge of this barren tract rises a shady grove. Here the firs are straight and strong, with wild clematis and honey-suckle clinging to their stems and branches, for the winter floods have washed down from the high lands and left among the rocks sufficient soil to sustain them.

On reaching this grove, Maurice consulted his watch. It was just noon; he had feared he was late, but he was fully an hour in advance of the appointed time. He seated himself on a ledge of one of the high rocks scattered among the firs, whence he could survey the entire Rèche, and waited.

The weather was sultry in the extreme. The rays of the scorching August sun fell on the sandy soil, and speedily withered the few weeds which had sprung up since the last rainfall. The stillness was profound. Not a sound broke the silence, not even the chirp of a bird, the buzzing of an insect, nor the faintest whisper of a breeze passing through the firs. All nature was apparently asleep—taking its siesta—and there was nothing to remind one of life, motion, or mankind. This repose of nature, which contrasted so vividly with the tumult raging in his own heart, soon exerted a beneficial effect on Maurice. These few moments of solitude afforded him an opportunity to regain his composure, and to collect his thoughts scattered by the storm of passion, as leaves are scattered by the fierce November gale.

With sorrow comes experience, and that cruel knowledge of life which teaches one to guard one's self against one's hopes. It was not until he heard the conversation of the peasants standing near the ferry that Maurice fully realized the horror of Lacheneur's position. Suddenly precipitated from the social eminence he had attained, the whilom lord of Sairmeuse found, in the valley of humiliation into which he was cast, only hatred, distrust, and scorn. Both factions despised and derided him. Traitor, cried one; thief, cried the other. He no longer held any social status. He was the fallen man, the man who *had* been, and who was no more. Was not the excessive misery of such a position a sufficient explanation of the strangest and wildest resolutions?

This thought made Maurice tremble. Connecting the conversation of the peasants with the words spoken by Lacheneur to Chanlouineau on the preceding evening at Escorval, he came to the conclusion that this report of Marie-Anne's marriage to the young farmer was not so improbable as he had at first supposed. But why should M. Lacheneur give his daughter to an uncultured peasant? From mercenary motives? Certainly not, since he had just refused an alliance of which he had been justly proud even in his days of prosperity. Could it be in order to satisfy his wounded pride then? Perhaps so; possibly he did not wish it to be said that he owed anything to a son-in-law.

Maurice was exhausting all his ingenuity and penetration in endeavouring to solve this knotty point, when at last, along the foot-path crossing the waste, he perceived a figure approaching him. It was Marie-Anne. He rose to his feet, but fearing observation did not venture to leave the shelter of the grove. Marie-Anne must have felt a similar fear, for as she hurried on she cast anxious glances on every side. Maurice remarked, not without surprise, that she was bare-headed, and had neither shawl nor scarf about her shoulders.

As she reached the edge of the wood, he sprang towards her, and catching hold of her hand raised it to his lips. But this hand which she had so often yielded to him was now gently withdrawn, and with so sad a gesture that he could not help feeling there was no hope.

"I came, Maurice," she began, "because I could not endure the thought of your anxiety. By doing so I have betrayed my father's confidence. He was obliged to leave home, and I hastened here; and yet I promised him, only two hours ago, that I would never see you again. You hear me—never!"

She spoke hurriedly, but Maurice was appalled by the firmness of her accent. Had he been less agitated, he would have seen what a terrible effort this semblance of calm cost the girl he loved. He would have detected the agony she was striving to conceal in the pallor of her cheeks, the twitching of her lips, and the redness of her eye-lids which, although recently bathed with fresh water, still betrayed the tears she had wept during the night.

"If I have come," she continued, "it is only to tell you that, for your own sake, as well as for mine, you must not retain the slightest shadow of hope. It is all over; we must separate for ever! It is only weak natures that revolt against a destiny which cannot be altered. Let us accept our fate uncomplainingly. I wished to see you once more, and to bid you be of good courage. Go away, Maurice—leave Escorval—forget me!"

"Forget you, Marie-Anne!" exclaimed the poor fellow, "forget you!" His eyes met hers, and in a husky voice he added: "Will you then forget me?"

"I am a woman, Maurice—"

But he interrupted her. "Ah! I did not expect this," he said, despondingly. "Poor fool that I was! I believed you would surely find a way to touch your father's heart."

She blushed slightly, and with evident hesitation, replied, "I threw myself at my father's feet, but he repulsed me."

Maurice was thunderstruck, but recovering himself: "It was because you did not know how to speak to him!" he exclaimed with passionate emphasis; "but I shall know how I will present such arguments that he will be forced to yield. Besides, what right has he to ruin my happiness with his caprices? I love you, you love me, and by the right of love, you are mine—mine rather than his! I will make him understand this, you shall see. Where is he? Where can I find him?"

Already he was starting to go, he knew not where, when Marie-Anne caught him by the arm. "Remain here," she answered in a tone of authority surprising in one of her sex and youth, "remain! Ah, you have failed to understand me, Maurice. But you must know the truth. I am acquainted now with the reasons of my father's refusal; and though his decision should cost me my life, I approve it. Don't try to find my father. If he were moved by your prayers, and gave his consent, I should have the courage to refuse mine!"

Maurice was so beside himself that this reply did not enlighten him. Crazed with anger and despair, regardless even of how he spoke to the woman he loved so deeply, he exclaimed: "Is it for Chanlouineau, then, that you are reserving your consent? I've already heard that he goes about everywhere saying you will soon be his wife."

Marie-Anne could not conceal all resentment of these words; and yet there was more sorrow than anger in the glance she cast on Maurice. "Must I stoop so low as to defend myself from such an imputation?" she asked sadly. "Must I tell you that even if I suspect such an arrangement between my father and Chanlouineau, I have not been consulted? Must I tell you that there are some sacrifices which are beyond the strength of human nature? Understand this: I have found strength to renounce the man I love—I shall never be able to accept another in his place!"

Maurice hung his head, abashed by her earnest words, and dazzled by the sublime expression of her face. Reason returned to him; he realised the enormity of his suspicions, and was horrified with himself for having dared to give them utterance. "Oh! forgive me!" he faltered, "forgive me!"

What did the mysterious motive of all these events which had so rapidly succeeded each other; what did M. Lacheneur's secrets or Marie-Anne's reticence, matter to him now? He was seeking some chance of salvation, and believed that he had found it. "We must fly!" he exclaimed; "fly at once without pausing to look back. Before night we shall have crossed the frontier." So saying, he sprang towards her with outstretched arms, as if to seize her and carry her off.

But she checked him by a single look. "Fly!" said she reproachfully; "fly!—and is it you, Maurice, who thus advises me? What! while my poor father is crushed with misfortune, am I to add despair and shame to his sorrows? His friends have deserted him; must I, his daughter, also abandon him? Ah! if I did that, I should be a vile, cowardly creature! If, when I believed my father to be the true owner of Sairmeuse, he had asked of me such a sacrifice as that I consented to last night, I might, perhaps, have resolved on doing what you say. I might have left Sairmeuse in

broad day-light on my lover's arm, for it isn't the world I fear : But if one might fly from the château of a wealthy happy father, one *cannot* desert a despairing, penniless parent. Leave me, Maurice, where honour holds me. It will not be difficult for me, the daughter of generations of peasants, to become a peasant myself. Leave me ! I cannot endure any more ! Go ! and remember that it is impossible to be utterly wretched if one's conscience is clean, and one's duty fulfilled !”

Maurice was about to reply, when a crackling of dry branches made him turn his head. Scarcely ten paces off, Martial de Sairmeuse was standing under the firs leaning on his gun.

VI.

THE Duke de Sairmeuse had indulged in but little sleep on the night of his return, or as he phrased it “ of his restoration.” Although he pretended to be inaccessible to the emotions which agitate the common herd, the scenes of the day had in point of fact greatly excited him ; and, on lying down to rest, he could not help reviewing them, although he made it a rule of life never to reflect. While exposed to the scrutiny of the village peasants and of his own aristocratic acquaintances, he had felt that honour required him to appear cold and indifferent to everything that transpired, but as soon as he was alone in the privacy of his own bed-room, he gave free vent to his satisfaction.

This satisfaction amounted to perfect joy, almost verging on delirium. He was now forced to admit to himself Lacheneur had rendered him an immense service in voluntarily restoring Sairmeuse. This man to whom he had displayed the blackest ingratitude, this man, honest to heroism, whom he had treated like an unfaithful servant, had just relieved him of an anxiety which had long poisoned his life. Indeed, Lacheneur had just placed the Duke de Sairmeuse beyond the reach of a very possible calamity which he had dreaded for some time back.

If his secret anxiety had been made known, it would have caused some little merriment. The less fortunate of the returning *émigrés* were in the habit of remarking that the Sairmeuses would never know want as they possessed property in England of a value of many million francs. Broadly speaking, the statement was true, only the property in question—property coming from Martial's mother and maternal grandfather—had not been left to the duke, but to Martial himself. It is true that the Duke de Sairmeuse enjoyed absolute control over this enormous fortune ; he disposed of the capital and the immense revenues just as he pleased, although in reality everything belonged to his son—to his only son. The duke himself possessed nothing—a pitiful income of twelve hundred francs, or so, strictly speaking, not even the means of subsistence.

Martial, who was just coming of age, had certainly never uttered a word which might lead his father to suppose that he had any intention of removing the property from his control ; still this word might some day or another be spoken, and at the thought of such a contingency the duke shuddered with horror. He saw himself reduced to a pension, a very handsome pension undoubtedly, but still a fixed, immutable, regular allowance, by which he would be obliged to regulate his expenditure. He would have to calculate that two ends might meet—he, who had been accustomed to inexhaustible coffers. “ And this will necessarily happen sooner or later,” he thought.

"If Martial should marry, if he should become ambitious, or meet with evil counsellors, then my reign will end."

Hence, the duke watched and studied his son much as a jealous woman studies and watches the lover she mistrusts. He thought he could read in his son's eyes many thoughts which Martial never had; he carefully noted whether the marquis was gay or sad, careless or pre-occupied, and according to the young man's mood, he became reassured or grew still more alarmed. Sometimes he imagined the worst. "If I should quarrel by-and-bye with Martial," he thought, "he would take possession of his entire fortune, and I should be left absolutely without bread."

To a man like the Duke de Sairmeuse, who judged the sentiments of others by his own, these torturing apprehensions proved a terrible chastisement; and there were days when his personal poverty and impotence well-nigh drove him mad. "What am I?" he would say to himself in a fit of rage. "A mere plaything in the hands of a child. My son owns me. If I displease him, he will cast me aside. Yes, he will be able to dismiss me just as he would a lacquey. If I enjoy his fortune, it will be because he allows me to do so. I owe my very existence, as well as my luxuries, to his charity. But a moment's anger, even a whim, may deprive me of everything."

With such ideas in his brain, the duke could not love his son. Indeed, he hated him. He passionately envied him all the advantages he possessed—his youth, his millions, his physical good looks, and his talents, which were really of a superior order. We every day meet mothers who are jealous of their daughters, and in the same way there are fathers who are jealous of their sons. This was one of those cases. The duke, however, showed no outward sign of mental disquietude; and if Martial had possessed less penetration, he might have believed that his father adored him. However, if he *had* detected the duke's secret, he did not reveal his knowledge, nor did he abuse his power. Their manner towards each other was perfect. The duke was kind even to weakness; Martial full of deference. But their relations were not those of father and son. One was in constant fear of displeasing the other; the other a little too sure of his power. They lived on a footing of perfect equality, like two companions of the same age. From this trying situation, Lacheneur had now rescued the duke. On becoming once more the owner of Sairmeuse, an estate worth more than three million francs, his grace freed himself from his son's tyranny; and recovered all his liberty. What brilliant projects flitted through his brain that night! He beheld himself the richest landowner in the province; and in addition he was the king's chosen friend. To what then might he not aspire? Such a prospect enchanted him. He felt quite young again: he had shaken off the twenty years he had spent in exile. So, rising before nine o'clock, he went to Martial's room to rouse him.

On returning from dining with the Marquis de Courtornieu, the evening before, the duke had promenaded through the château; but this hasty inspection by candle-light had not satisfied his curiosity. He wished to visit everything in detail now that it was day. So, followed by his son, he explored one after another the numerous rooms of this princely abode; and at every first step he took, the recollections of childhood crowded upon him. Lacheneur had such a wonderful respect for all the appointments of the château, that the duke found things as old as himself religiously preserved, and occupying the old familiar places from which they had never been removed.

"Decidedly, marquis," he exclaimed when his inspection was concluded

"this Lacheneur wasn't such a rascal as I supposed. I am disposed to forgive him a great deal, on account of the care he has taken of our house in our absence."

Martial seemed engrossed in thought. "I think, sir," he said, at last, "that we should show our gratitude to this man by paying him a large indemnity."

This last word excited the duke's anger. "An indemnity!" he exclaimed. "Are you mad, marquis? Think of the income he has received out of my estate. Have you forgotten the calculation made for us last evening by the Chevalier de la Livandière?"

"The chevalier is a fool!" declared Martial, promptly. "He forgot that Lacheneur has trebled the value of Sairmeuse. I think our family honour requires us to give this man an indemnity of, at least, a hundred thousand francs. This would, moreover, be a good stroke of policy in the present state of public sentiment, and his majesty would, I am sure, be much pleased if we did so."

"Stroke of policy"—"public sentiment"—"his majesty." You might have obtained almost anything from M. de Sairmeuse by such words and arguments as these.

"Heavenly powers!" he exclaimed; "a hundred thousand francs! how you talk! It is all very well for you, with your fortune! Still, if you really think so—"

"Ah! my dear sir, isn't my fortune yours? Yes, such is really my opinion. So much so, indeed, that, if you will permit it, I will see Lacheneur myself, and arrange the matter in such a way that his pride won't be wounded. It would be worth our while to retain such devotion as his."

The duke opened his eyes to their widest extent. "Lacheneur's pride!" he murmured. "Worth while to retain his devotion! Why do you talk in that strain? What's the reason of this extraordinary interest?"

He paused, enlightened by a sudden recollection. "Ah, I understand!" he exclaimed; "I understand. He has a pretty daughter." Martial smiled without replying.

"Yes, as pretty as a rose," continued the duke; "but a hundred thousand francs; zounds! That's a round sum to pay for such a whim. But, if you insist upon it—"

After this the matter was settled and, two hours later, armed with the authorization he had solicited, Martial started on his mission. The first peasant he met told him the way to the cottage which M. Lacheneur now occupied. "Follow the river," said the man, "and when you see a pine grove on your left, cross through it and follow the path over the waste."

Martial was crossing through the grove when he heard the sound of voices. He approached, recognized Marie-Anne and Maurice d'Escorval, and, obeying an angry impulse, paused.

During the decisive moments of life, when one's entire future depends on a word or a gesture, twenty contradictory inspirations can traverse the mind in the time occupied by a flash of lightning.

On thus suddenly perceiving the young Marquis de Sairmeuse, Maurice d'Escorval's first thought was—How long has he been here? Has he been playing the spy? Has he been listening to us? What did he hear? His first impulse was to spring upon his enemy, to strike him in the face, and compel him to engage in a hand-to-hand struggle. The thought of Marie-Anne checked him, however. He reflected upon the possible, even probable

results of a quarrel arising under such circumstances. The combat which would ensue would cost this pure young girl her reputation. Martial would talk about it; and country folks are pitiless. He could imagine Marie-Anne becoming the talk of the neighbourhood, and saw the finger of scorn pointed at her. Accordingly, he made a great effort and mastered his anger. These reflections occupied merely a few seconds, and then young d'Escorval politely touching his hat, advanced towards Martial and observed,

"You are a stranger, sir, and have no doubt lost your way?"

His words were ill-chosen, and defeated his prudent intentions. A curt "Mind your own business" would have been less wounding. He forgot that this word "stranger" was the most deadly insult that one could cast in the face of the former *émigrés*, now returning in the rear of the allies.

However, the young marquis did not change his nonchalant attitude. He touched the peak of his hunting cap with one finger, and replied: "It's true I've lost my way."

Marie-Anne, despite her agitation, easily perceived that her presence alone restrained the hatred animating these young men. Their attitude, and the glance with which they measured each other, plainly spoke of hostile feelings. If one of them was ready to spring upon the other, the latter was on the alert, prepared to defend himself.

A short pause followed the marquis's last words. At length he spoke again. "A peasant's directions are not generally remarkable for their clearness," he said, lightly; "and for more than an hour I have been trying to find the house to which M. Lacheneur has retired."

"Ah!"

"I am sent to him by the Duke de Sairmeuse, my father."

Knowing what he did, Maurice supposed that these strangely rapacious individuals had some fresh claim to make. "I thought," said he, "that all relations between M. Lacheneur and M. de Sairmeuse were broken off yesterday evening at the abbé's house."

This was said in the most provoking tone, and yet Martial never so much as frowned. He had sworn that he would remain calm, and he had strength enough to keep his word. "If these relations have been broken off," he replied, "believe me, M. d'Escorval, it is no fault of ours."

"Then it is not as people say?"

"What people? Who?"

"The people here in the neighbourhood."

"Ah! And what do these people say?"

"The truth; that you have been guilty of an offence which a man of honour could never forgive nor forget."

The young marquis shook his head gravely. "Your condemnation is very hasty, sir," he said, coldly. "Permit me to hope that M. Lacheneur will be less severe than you are; and that his resentment, his just resentment, I confess, will vanish before a truthful explanation."

Martial profited by the effect he had produced to walk towards Marie-Anne, and, addressing himself exclusively to her, now seemed to completely ignore Maurice's presence. "For there has been a mistake—a misunderstanding, mademoiselle," he continued. "Do not doubt it. The Sairmeuses are not ingrates. How could any one have supposed that we would intentionally give offence to a devoted friend of our family, and that at a moment when he had rendered us such signal service! A true gentleman like my father, and a hero of probity like yours, cannot fail to esteem each

other. I admit that yesterday M. de Sairmeuse did not appear to advantage; but the step he takes to-day proves his sincere regret."

Certainly this was not the cavalier tone which Martial had employed in speaking to Marie-Anne for the first time on the square in front of the church. He had removed his cap, his attitude was full of deference, and he spoke as respectfully as though he were addressing some haughty duchess, instead of the humble daughter of that "rascal" Lacheneur. Was this only a *roué's* manoeuvre? Or had a true sense of this noble girl's sterling worth penetrated his heart? Perhaps it was both. At all events it would have been difficult for him to say how far the homage he thus paid was intentional, and how far involuntary.

"My father," he continued, "is an old man who has had cruel sufferings. Exile is hard to bear. But if sorrow and deception have embittered his character, they have not changed his heart. His apparent imperiousness conceals a kindness of heart which I have often seen degenerate into positive weakness. And—why should I not confess it?—the Duke de Sairmeuse, with his white hair, still retains the illusions of a child. He refuses to believe that the world has progressed during the past twenty years. Moreover, people had deceived him by the most absurd fabrications. To speak plainly, even while we were in Montaignac, M. Lacheneur's enemies succeeded in prejudicing my father against him."

One might have sworn that Martial was speaking the truth; for his voice was so persuasive, and his glance, his gestures, and the expression on his face corresponded so fittingly with his words. Maurice, who felt certain that young de Sairmeuse was lying, impudently lying, was abashed by this scientific prevarication, so universally practiced in good society, but of which he was happily and utterly ignorant. However, if the marquis were lying, what did he want here, and what was the meaning of this farce?

"Need I tell you, mademoiselle," Martial resumed, "all that I suffered last evening in the little sitting-room in the parsonage? Never in my whole life can I recollect such a cruel moment? I understood, and I did honour to M. Lacheneur's heroism. Hearing of our arrival, he came without hesitation, without delay, to voluntarily surrender a princely fortune—and he was insulted. This excessive injustice horrified me. And if I did not openly protest against it—if I did not show my indignation—it was only because contradiction drives my father to the verge of frenzy. And what good would it have done for me to protest? Your filial love and piety had a far more powerful effect than any words of mine would have had. You were scarcely out of the house before the duke, already ashamed of his injustice, said to me: 'I have been wrong, but I am an old man; it is hard for me to decide to make the first advance; you, marquis, go and find M. Lacheneur, and obtain his forgiveness.'"

Marie-Anne, redder than a peony, and terribly embarrassed, lowered her eyes. "I thank you, sir," she faltered, "in my father's name—"

"Oh! do not thank me," interrupted Martial earnestly; "it will be my duty, on the contrary, to give *you* thanks, if you can induce M. Lacheneur to accept the reparation which is due to him—and he will accept it, if you will only condescend to plead our cause. Who could resist your sweet voice, your beautiful beseeching eyes?"

However inexperienced Maurice might be, he could no longer fail to comprehend Martial's intentions. This man whom he mortally hated already, dared to speak of love to Marie-Anne, and in his presence. In other words, the marquis, not content with having ignored and insulted him, presumed

to take an insolent advantage of his supposed simplicity. The certainty of this outrage made his blood boil. He seized Martial by the arm, and threw him forcibly against a fir tree, several paces off. "This last is too much, Marquis de Sairmeuse!" he cried.

Maurice's attitude was so threatening, that Martial fully expected another attack. He had fallen on one knee; without rising he now raised his gun, as if to take aim. It was not from anything like cowardice that the Marquis de Sairmeuse felt an impulse to fire upon an unarmed foe; but the affront which he had received was in his opinion so dastardly that he would have shot Maurice like a dog, rather than feel the weight of his hand upon his arm again.

For some minutes previously, Marie-Anne had been expecting and hoping for Maurice's outburst of anger. She was even more inexperienced than her lover; but she was a woman, and could not fail to understand the meaning of the young marquis's manner. He was evidently "paying his court to her." And with what intentions, it was only too easy to divine. Her agitation, while the marquis spoke to her in an unceasingly tender voice had changed at first to stupor, and then to indignation, as she realized his marvellous audacity. After that, how could she help blessing the act of violence which had curtailed a situation, so insulting for herself and so humiliating for Maurice? An ordinary woman would have thrown herself between two men anxious to kill each other; but Marie-Anne remained impassive. Was it not Maurice's duty to protect her when she was insulted? Who, then, if not he, should defend her from this young rouse's insolent gallantry? She would have blushed, she who was energy personified, to love a weak and pusillanimous man.

But after all intervention was quite unnecessary; for Maurice understood that the situation required him to be very cautious under penalty of giving the offending party the advantage. He felt that Marie-Anne must not be regarded as the cause of the quarrel; and this thought at once produced a powerful reaction in his mind. He recovered, as if by magic, his usual coolness and the free exercise of his faculties.

"Yes," he resumed, in a bold voice, "this is hypocrisy enough. To dare to prate of reparation after the insults that you and yours have inflicted, is adding intentional humiliation to injury—and I will not permit it."

Martial had thrown aside his gun; he now rose, and with a phlegm he had learnt in England, complacently brushed his dusty knee. He was too discerning not to perceive that Maurice had purposely disguised the true cause of his passionate outburst; and though he would not have been displeased if young d'Escorval had confessed the truth, the matter was after all of little moment.

However, it was necessary to make some reply, and to preserve the superiority which he imagined he had hitherto maintained. "You will never know, sir," he said, glancing alternately at his gun and at Marie-Anne, "all that you owe to Mademoiselle Lacheneur. We shall meet again, I hope——"

"You have made that remark before," Maurice interrupted, tauntingly. "Nothing is easier than to find me. The first peasant you meet will point out the Baron d'Escorval's house."

"Very good, sir, I can't promise but that two of my friends will call upon you."

"Oh! whenever you please!"

"Certainly; but it would gratify me to know by what right you

make yourself the judge of M. Lacheneur's honour, and take upon yourself to defend what has not been attacked. Who has given you this right?"

From Martial's sneering tone, Maurice felt certain the marquis had overheard at least a part of his conversation with Marie-Anne. "My right," he replied, "is that of friendship. If I tell you that your advances are unwelcome, it is because I know that M. Lacheneur will accept nothing from you. No, nothing, no matter how you may disguise the alms you offer merely to appease your own consciences. He will never forgive the affront which is his honour and your shame. Ah! you thought to degrade him, Messieurs de Sairmeuse! and you have raised him far above your own mock grandeur. *He* receive anything from you! Go and learn that your millions can never give you a pleasure equal to the ineffable joy he will feel when he sees you roll by in your carriage, for he can say to himself: 'Those people owe everything to me!'"

Maurice spoke with such an intensity of feeling that Marie-Anne could not resist the impulse to press his hand; and this gesture was his revenge on Martial, who turned pale with passion.

"But I have still another right," continued Maurice. "My father yesterday had the honour of asking M. Lacheneur for his daughter's hand—"

"And I refused it!" cried a terrible voice.

The marquis, Marie-Anne, and Maurice turned with a movement of mingled alarm and surprise. M. Lacheneur was beside them, and just behind him stood Chaulouineau, surveying the group with threatening eyes.

"Yes, I refused it," resumed M. Lacheneur, "and I do not believe that my daughter will marry any one without my consent. What did you promise me this morning, Marie-Anne? And yet you grant a rendezvous to gallants in the grove? Go home at once!"

"But, father——"

"Go home!" he repeated angrily. "Go home, I command you."

Marie-Anne did not utter another word; but, with a look of resignation, turned to depart, though not without bestowing on Maurice a saddened gaze in which he read a last farewell.

As soon as she was some twenty paces off, M. Lacheneur, with folded arms, confronted the baron's son. "As for you, M. D'Escorval," said he, "I hope that you'll no longer prowl round about my daughter——"

"I swear to you, sir——"

"Oh, no oaths, if you please. It is an evil action to try and turn a young girl from her duty, which is obedience. You have severed for ever all connection between your family and mine."

Maurice tried to excuse himself; but M. Lacheneur interrupted him. "Enough! enough!" said he, "go back home."

And as the young fellow hesitated, he seized him by the collar and dragged him to the little foot-path, leading through the grove. This was the work of scarcely ten seconds, and yet Lacheneur found time to whisper in Maurice's ear, in his formerly friendly tones: "Go, you young wretch! do you want to render all my precautions useless?"

He watched Maurice as the latter disappeared, bewildered by the scene he had witnessed, and stupefied by what he had just heard; and it was not until the late lord of Sairmeuse saw that young D'Escorval was out of hearing that he turned to Martial. "As I have had the honour of meeting you, M. le Marquis," said he, "I deem it my duty to inform you that Chupin and his sons are searching for you everywhere. It is at the request of the

duke, your father, who is anxious for you to go at once to the Château de Courtornieu." Then turning to Chanlouineau, he added: "We will now proceed on our way."

But Martial detained him with a gesture. "I am much surprised to hear that they are seeking me," said he. "My father knows very well where he sent me—I was going to your house, and at his request."

"To my house?"

"Yes to your house, to express our sincere regret for the scene which took place at the parsonage yesterday evening." And then, without waiting for any rejoinder, Martial, with wonderful cleverness and felicity of expression, began to repeat to the father the story he had just related to the daughter. According to his version, the duke and himself were in despair. How could M. Lacheneur suppose them guilty of such black ingratitude? Why had he retired so precipitately? The Duke de Sairmeuse held at M. Lacheneur's disposal any amount which it might please him to mention—sixty, a hundred thousand francs, even more.

But M. Lacheneur did not appear to be dazzled in the least; and when Martial had concluded, he replied respectfully but coldly that he would consider the matter.

This coldness amazed Chanlouineau; who, when the marquis after many earnest protestations at last turned his face homewards, naïvely declared, "We have misjudged these people,"

But M. Lacheneur shrugged his shoulders. "And so you are foolish enough to suppose that he offered all that money to *me*?"

"Zounds! I have ears."

"Ah well! my poor boy, you must not believe all they hear if you have. The truth is, these large sums were intended to win my daughter's favour. She has taken the marquis's fancy, and—he wishes to make her his mistress——"

Chanlouineau stopped short, with eyes flashing and hands clenched. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "prove that and I am yours, body and soul—to do anything you like?"

VII.

"Ah, what a girl she is, this Marie-Anne Lacheneur. I've never met the like of her before—what beauty, grace, and dignity combined—" thus soliloquised Martial when after leaving the grove he turned in the direction of Sairmeuse. At the risk of losing his way he took what seemed to be the shortest course, cutting across the fields and leaping the ditches with the aid of his gun. He found a peculiar pleasure in picturing Marie-Anne as he had just seen her. Now blushing and growing pale with frightened modesty; and now raising her head with haughty pride and disdain. Who would have suspected that such girlish artlessness and such outward frigidity of manner concealed an energetic nature and an impassioned soul? What an expression of love lighted up her large black eyes when she glanced at young D'Escorval! Ah, to be looked at thus only for a moment, was felicity indeed. No wonder that Maurice D'Escorval was madly in love with her. Was not he—the marquis—in love with her himself? "Ah," exclaimed he, "Come what may she shall be mine."

Thus meditating, the Marquis de Sairmeuse turned to the strategic side of the question—to assist him in the study of which he was, despite his

recent manhood, able to bring considerable experience. His *début*, he was forced to admit, had been neither fortunate nor adroit. Compliments and offers of money had alike been rejected. If Marie-Anne had heard his covert insinuations with evident horror, M. Lacheneur had received with even more than coldness his repeated offers of actual wealth. Moreover, he remembered Chanlouineau's terrible eyes; and the way the sturdy rustic measured him. Had Marie-Anne made but a sign, the young farmer would have crushed him like an egg-shell, without the least thought of his noble ancestors. Probably the stalwart young peasant was another of Marie, Anne's visitors, in which case there would be three rivals for her favour. However, the more difficult the undertaking seemed, the more Martial's passions were inflamed. He reflected that his blunders might after all be repaired; for occasions of meeting would not be wanting, since he must have frequent interviews with M. Lacheneur in effecting a formal transfer of Sairmeuse. If he could only win the father over to his side. With the daughter his course was plain. Profiting by experience he must henceforth be as timid as he had hitherto been bold, and she would be hard to please if she were not flattered by such a triumph of her beauty. Young D'Escorval remained to be disposed of. True, the baron's son had been rudely dismissed by M. Lacheneur, and yet the latter's anger seemed rather far-fetched to be absolutely real. Was this incident merely a comedy, and if so who had Lacheneur wished to deceive—he—the marquis—or Chanlouineau? And then, if there *had* been deception, what could have been its motive? On the other hand it was impossible to call young D'Escorval to account for his insolence, for if even a pretext were found, Marie-Anne would never forgive the man who raised his hand against one who, for the time being, was apparently her favoured lover—so, hard as it was, Martial must yet swallow Maurice's affront in silence. Ah, he would have given a handsome sum to any one who would have devised a means of sending the baron's son away from the neighbourhood.

Revolving in his mind these ideas and plans, the precise consequences of which he could neither calculate nor foresee, Martial was walking up the avenue leading to the Château de Sairmeuse when he heard hurried footsteps behind him. He turned and paused on seeing two men running after him and motioning him to stop. The younger was one of Father Chupin's sons, and the other, the old rascal himself.

The quondam poacher had been enrolled among the servants charged with preparing Sairmeuse for the duke's reception? and he was already doing everything in his power to make himself indispensable. "Ah, M. le Marquis," he cried, "we have been searching for you everywhere, my son and I. It was M. le Duc——"

"Very well," said Martial dryly. "I am returning——"

But Chupin was not over sensitive; and despite his curt reception, he ventured to follow the marquis, at a little distance behind it is true, but still sufficiently near to make himself heard. He also had his schemes, and it was not long before he began to repeat all the calumnies that had lately been spread about the neighbourhood in reference to Lacheneur. Why did he choose this subject in preference to any other? Did he suspect the young marquis's passion for Marie-Anne? Perhaps so; at all events he described Lacheneur (he no longer styled him "Monsieur"), as a thorough rascal. The complete surrender of Sairmeuse, he said, was only a farce, for Marie-Anne's father must possess thousands, and hundreds of thousand of francs, since he was about to marry his daughter. Any suspicions the old scoundrel

may have entertained, became certainties when he heard Martial eagerly ask : "What ! is Mademoiselle Lacheneur going to be married ?"

"Yes, sir."

"And who's the happy man ?"

"Why Chanlouineau, the fellow the peasants wanted to kill yesterday on the market-place because he was so disrespectful to the duke. He is an avaricious man ; and if Marie-Anne does not bring him a good round sum as a dowry, he will never marry her, no matter how beautiful she may be."

"Are you sure of what you say ?"

"Oh, its quite true. My eldest son heard from Chanlouineau and from Lacheneur, that the wedding would take place within a month." And turning to his son, the old knave added : "Is it not true, boy ?"

"Yes," promptly replied the youth, although he had heard nothing of the kind.

Martial made no rejoinder. Perhaps he was ashamed at having allowed himself to listen to all this tittle tattle ; though on the other hand he could but feel grateful to Chupin for such important information. Lacheneur's conduct now appeared all the more mysterious. Why had he refused to give his daughter to Maurice d'Escorval ; why did he wish to marry her to a peasant ? His conduct must be guided by some potent motive, which he—Martial—ignored.

Thus cogitating, the young marquis reached Sairmeuse, where a strange scene awaited him. On the broad gravel walk intervening between the peristyle of the château and the lawn, a huge pile of furniture, crockery, linen, and clothes might be perceived. Half a dozen lacqueys were running to and fro executing the orders of the Duke de Sairmeuse, who stood on the threshold of the building, and a passer-by would have supposed that the occupants of the château were moving. To Martial the scene was inexplicable. Approaching his father, and saluting him respectfully, he enquired what it meant.

The duke burst into a hearty laugh. "What, can't you guess ?" he replied. "Why, it's very simple. When the lawful master returns home, he finds it delightful the first night to sleep under the usurper's counterpane, but afterwards it is not so pleasant. Everything here reminds me too forcibly of M. Lacheneur. It seems to me that I am in his house, and the thought is unendurable. So I have had them collect everything belonging to him and to his daughter—everything in fact which did not belong to the château in former years, and the servants will put all these goods and chattels into a cart and carry them to him."

The young marquis gave fervent thanks to heaven that he had arrived before it was too late. Had his father's project been executed, he might have bid farewell to all his hopes for ever. "You don't surely mean to do this, M. le Duc ?" he said earnestly.

"And why not, pray ? Who can prevent me from doing it ?"

"No one, most assuredly. But you yourself will decide on reflection, that a man who has not conducted himself *too* badly, has at least a right to some consideration."

The duke seemed greatly astonished. "Consideration !" he exclaimed. "This rascal has a right to some consideration ! You must be joking surely. What ! I give him—that is to say—you give him a hundred thousand francs, and that doesn't satisfy him ! He is entitled to consideration ! You, who are after the daughter, may treat him to as much consideration as you like, but I shall do as I please !"

"You have a perfect right to do so, M. le Duc," replied Martial, "but I would respectfully observe, that if I were in your place I should think twice before acting. Lacheneur has surrendered Sairmeuse: that is all very well; but how can you authenticate your claim to the property? Suppose you imprudently irritated him. What would you do if he changed his mind? What would become of your right to the estate?"

M. Sairmeuse turned livid. "Zounds!" he exclaimed. "I had not thought of that. Here, you fellows, take all these things indoors again, and quickly!" And as the lacqueys prepared to obey his orders, "Now," he remarked, "let us hasten to Courtornieu. They have already sent for us twice. It must be business of the utmost importance which demands our attention."

The Château de Courtornieu is, next to that of Sairmeuse, the most magnificent seignorial seat in the district of Montagnac. When the carriage conveying Martial and his father turned from the public highway into the long narrow rough by-road leading to this historic mansion, the jolting aroused the duke from a profound reverie into which he had fallen on leaving Sairmeuse.

The marquis thought that he had caused this unusual fit of abstraction. "It is the result of my adroit manœuvre," he said to himself, not without secret satisfaction. "Until the restitution of Sairmeuse is legalized, I can make my father do anything I wish; yes, anything. And if it is necessary, he will even invite Lacheneur and Marie-Anne to his table."

Martial was mistaken, however. The duke had already forgotten the matter, for his most vivid impressions were more fleeting than the briefest summer shower. After suddenly lowering the glass window in front of the carriage, and ordering the coachman to walk his horses up the road, he turned to his son and remarked, "Let us have a few minutes' chat. Are you really in love with that girl Lacheneur?"

Martial could not repress a start. "Oh! in love," said he, lightly, "that would perhaps be saying too much. Let me say she has taken my fancy, that will be sufficient."

The duke glanced at his son with a bantering air. "Really, you delight me!" he exclaimed. "I feared that this love affair might derange, at least for the moment, certain plans that I have formed—for I have formed certain plans for you."

"The deuce!"

"Yes, I have my plans, and I will communicate them to you later in detail. I will content myself to-day by recommending you to study Mademoiselle Blanche de Courtornieu."

Martial made no reply. This recommendation was indeed superfluous. If Mademoiselle Lacheneur had made him forget momentarily Mademoiselle de Courtornieu that morning, the remembrance of Marie-Anne was now effaced by the radiant image of Blanche.

"Before discussing the daughter," resumed the duke, "let us speak of the father. He is one of my best friends; and I know him thoroughly. You have heard men reproach me for what they style my prejudices; haven't you? Well, in comparison with the Marquis de Courtornieu, I am only a mere Jacobin."

"Oh! father!"

"Really, such is the case. If I am behind the age in which I live, he belongs to the reign of Louis XIV. Only—for there is an only—the principles which I openly profess, he keeps locked up in his snuff-box—and trust him

for not forgetting to open it at the proper moment. He has suffered cruelly for his opinions, in the sense of having so often been obliged to conceal them. He concealed them, first under the Consulate, when he returned from exile. He dissimulated them even more courageously under the Empire—for he played the part of a chamberlain to Bonaparte, this dear marquis. But, hush! don't remind him of that proof of heroism; he has bitterly deplored it since the battle of Lutzen."

This was the tone in which M. de Sairmeuse was accustomed to speak of his best friends. "The history of the marquis's fortune," he continued, "is the history of his marriages—I say marriages, because he has married a number of times, and always advantageously. Yes, in a period of fifteen years he has had the misfortune to lose three wives, each richer than the other. His daughter's mother was his third and last wife, a Cissé Blossac—who died in 1809. He comforted himself after each bereavement by purchasing a quantity of lands or bonds. So that now he is as rich as you are, and his influence is powerful and wide-spread. I forgot one detail, however. He believes, they tell me, in the growing power of the clergy, and has become very devout."

The duke checked himself, for the carriage had entered the marquis's grounds, and was now approaching the grand entrance of the Château de Courtornieu. As the wheels grated over the gravel, M. de Courtornieu himself appeared on the threshold of the mansion and hastily descended the steps to receive his guests in person. This was a flattering distinction, which he seldom lavished upon his visitors. The marquis was long rather than tall, and very solemn in deportment. His angular form was surmounted by a remarkably small head (a distinctive characteristic of his race), covered with thin glossy black hair, and lighted by cold, round black eyes. The pride that becomes a nobleman, and the humility that befits a christian, were continually at war with each other in his countenance. He pressed M. de Sairmeuse's hands with a great show of friendship, and overwhelmed them with compliments expressed in a thin nasal voice, which, coming from his elongated frame, was as astonishing as would be the sound of a flute issuing from the pipes of an orphicleide.

"At last you have come," he said, "we were waiting for you before beginning to deliberate on a very grave and delicate matter. We are thinking of addressing a petition to his majesty. The nobility, who have suffered so much during the Revolution, have a right to expect ample compensation. Our neighbours, to the number of sixteen, are now assembled in my cabinet, transformed for the time into a council chamber."

Martial shuddered at the thought of all the ridiculous and tiresome conversation he would probably be obliged to listen to; and his father's recommendation occurred to him. "Shall we not have the honour of paying our respects to Mademoiselle de Courtornieu?" he asked.

"My daughter must be in the drawing-room with our cousin," replied the marquis in an indifferent tone, "at least, if she is not in the garden."

This might be construed as, "Go, and look for her if you choose." At any rate so Martial understood the marquis; and accordingly when the hall was reached, he allowed his father and M. de Courtornieu to go upstairs without him. At his request a servant opened the drawing-room door, but he found that apartment empty. He then turned into the garden, and after a fruitless search was retracing his steps towards the house, when, in the recesses of a shady bower, he espied the flowing folds of a white silk dress. Surmising that the wearer of this dainty toilet was Mademoiselle de

Courtornieu, he advanced towards the bower, and his heart throbbed quicker when he perceived that he was right. Mademoiselle Blanche was seated on a garden bench beside an elderly lady to whom she was reading a letter in a low voice. She was evidently greatly pre-occupied, since she did not hear Martial's approach. Pausing at about a dozen paces from the bower the susceptible young marquis lingered blissfully contemplating the charming tableau presented to his gaze.

Blanche de Courtornieu was not absolutely beautiful; but she was as pretty, as piquante, and as dainty as heart could desire. Bewitching indeed were her large velvety blue eyes, her dimpled chin, and fresh pouting lips. She was a blonde—but one of those dazzling, radiant blondes found only in the countries of the sun—and her hair, drawn high upon the top of her head, escaped on all sides in a profusion of glittering ringlets which seemed almost to sparkle in the play of the light breeze. One might, perhaps, have wished her a trifle taller. But she had the winning charm of all delicately formed women; and her figure was deliciously symmetrical and admirably proportioned.

The old axiom that appearances are often deceitful could not, however, have been better exemplified than in the case of this apparently innocent artless girl. The candour sparkling in her eyes concealed a parched, hollow soul, worthy of an experienced woman of the world, or of some old courtier. Being the only daughter of a millionaire *grand-seigneur* she had been so petted by all who approached her, so bespattered with adulation that every good quality she might have possessed had been blighted in the bud by the poisonous breath of flattery. She was only nineteen; and still it was impossible for any one to have been more susceptible to the charms of wealth and ambition. She dreamed of a position at court as most girls dream of a lover. If she had deigned to notice Martial—and she had remarked him—it was only because her father had told her that this young man might raise his wife to the highest sphere of power—a statement she had greeted with a “very well, we will see!” that would have changed an enamoured suitor's love into disgust.

After Martial had loitered a few minutes in contemplation he made up his mind to advance, and Mademoiselle Blanche, on seeing him, sprang up with a pretty affectation of intense timidity. Bowing low before her, the young marquis exclaimed in a tone of profound deference: “M. de Courtornieu, mademoiselle, was so kind as to tell me where I might have the honour of finding you. I had not courage enough to brave those formidable discussions indoors; but——” He paused, and pointing to the letter the young girl held in her hand, he added, “But I fear that I am interrupting you.”

“Oh! not in the least, Monsieur le Marquis, although this letter which I have just been reading has, I confess, deeply interested me. It was written by a poor child in whom I have taken a great interest—whom I have sent for at times when I felt lonely—Marie-Anne Lacheneur.”

Accustomed from his infancy to the hypocrisy of drawing-rooms, the young marquis had taught his face not to betray his feelings. He could have laughed gaily with anguish at his heart; he could have preserved the sternest gravity when inwardly convulsed with merriment. And yet, the mention of Marie-Anne's name coming from Mademoiselle de Courtornieu, caused his glance to waver. The thought that they knew each other flashed through his brain, and then with equal rapidity he recovered his self-possession. But Mademoiselle de Courtornieu had perceived his momentary agitation. “What can it mean?” she wondered, much disturbed. Still,

it was with a perfect assumption of innocence that she continued : " In fact you must have seen her, this poor Marie-Anne, M. le Marquis, since her father was the guardian of Sairmeuse ? "

" Yes, I have seen her, mademoiselle," replied Martial, quietly.

" Is she not remarkably beautiful ? Her beauty is of an unusual type, it quite takes one by surprise."

A fool would have protested. The marquis was not guilty of such folly. " Yes, she is very beautiful," said he.

Blanche de Courtornieu was slightly disconcerted by this apparent frankness ; and it was with an air of hypocritical compassion that she murmured : " Poor girl ! What will become of her ? Here is her father reduced to digging the ground."

" Oh ! you exaggerate, mademoiselle ; my father will always preserve Lacheneur from anything of that kind."

" Of course—I might have known that—but where will he find a husband for Marie-Anne ? "

" One has been found, already. I understand that she is to marry a farmer in the neighbourhood, who has some little property—a young fellow named Chanlouineau."

Mademoiselle le Courtornieu with all her apparent artlessness was more cunning than the marquis. She had satisfied herself that she had just grounds for her suspicions ; and she experienced a certain anger on finding him so well informed in regard to everything that concerned Mademoiselle Lacheneur. " And do you fancy this is the husband she dreamed of ? " she enquired still in a tone of affected benevolence. " Ah, well ! God grant that she may be happy ; for we were very fond of her, very—were we not, Aunt Medea ? "

" Yes, very," replied Aunt Medea, who was the elderly lady seated on the bench beside the Courtornieu heiress. She was a poor relation whom M. de Courtornieu had installed at the château as his daughter's chaperon, and she earned her daily bread by playing the part of echo to the authoritative Blanche.

" It grieves me to see these friendly relations, which were so dear to me, broken off," resumed Mademoiselle de Courtornieu. " But listen to what Marie-Anne writes." So saying she produced Mademoiselle Lacheneur's letter and read as follows : " My dear Blanche—You know that the Duke de Sairmeuse has returned. The news fell upon us like a thunderbolt. My father and I had grown too accustomed to consider the deposit entrusted to our fidelity, as our own property, and now we have been punished for doing so. At least we have done our duty, and now everything is finished. She whom you have called your friend, will henceforth be only a poor peasant girl, as her mother was before her."

The most attentive observer would have supposed that Mademoiselle Blanche was experiencing the keenest emotion. One would have sworn that it was only by intense effort that she succeeded in restraining her tears—that they were even trembling beneath the long lashes shading her eyes. In point of fact, however, she was trying to discover some indication of Martial's feelings. But now he was on his guard, and he listened to the perusal of the note with an imperturbable air. She continued :

" I should not be telling the truth if I said that I have not suffered on account of this sudden change. But I have courage left, and I shall learn how to submit. I shall, I hope, also have strength to forget, for I *must* forget ! The remembrances of past happiness would make my present misery intolerable."

Mademoiselle de Courtornieu suddenly folded up the letter. "Can you understand such pride as that?" said she. "And they accuse us daughters of the nobility of being proud!"

Martial made no response. He felt that his trembling voice would betray him. Great as was the emotion he concealed, it would have been all the greater if he had been allowed to read the concluding lines:—

"One must live, my dear Blanche," added Marie-Anne, "and I feel no false shame in asking you to aid me. I sew very nicely, as you know, and I could earn my livelihood by embroidery if I knew more people. I will call to-day at Courtornieu to ask you to give me a list of ladies to whom I can present myself on your recommendation."

But Mademoiselle de Courtornieu had taken good care not to allude to this touching request. She had read the commencement of the letter to Martial as a test, and plainly perceived that if her new-born suspicions were correct, at all events the young marquis was resolved not to betray himself any further. Rising from the bench, she now accepted his arm to return to the house. She seemed to have forgotten her friend, and soon engaged in a gay flirtation. They were sauntering along towards the château, when the sound of voices engaged in animated debate reached their ears. The council convened in M. de Courtornieu's cabinet was angrily discussing the proposed address to the king.

Mademoiselle Blanche paused. "I am trespassing upon your kindness, M. le Marquis," she said. "I am boring you with my silly chatter when you would undoubtedly prefer to be up-stairs."

"Certainly not," replied Martial laughing. "What should I do there? Men of action only intervene when the orators have finished."

He spoke so energetically, in spite of his jesting tone, that Mademoiselle de Courtornieu was fascinated. She saw before her, she believed, a man who, as her father had said, would rise to the highest position in the political world. Unfortunately, her admiration was disturbed by a ring at the great bell which always announced visitors. She faltered, let go her hold on Martial's arm, and exclaimed in an earnest tone. "Ah, no matter. I wish very much to know what is going on up-stairs. If I ask my father he will laugh at my curiosity, while you, if you are present at the conference, can tell me everything."

A wish thus expressed was a command. Martial bowed and withdrew. "She dismisses me," he said to himself as he mounted the staircase, "nothing could be more evident; and that without much ceremony. Why the deuce did she want to get rid of me?"

Why? Because that single peal of the bell announced a visitor to her; because she was expecting a visit from the former friend whose letter she had just been reading; and because she wished at any cost to prevent a meeting between Martial and Marie-Anne. She did not love the young marquis, and yet an agony of jealousy was torturing her. Such was the nature of Mademoiselle Blanche.

Her presentiments were realized. It was indeed Mademoiselle Lacheneur whom she found awaiting her in the drawing-room. Marie-Anne was paler than usual; but nothing in her manner betrayed the frightful anguish she had suffered during the past few days. In asking her former friend for a list of ladies to whom she could recommend her, she spoke as calmly and as quietly as in former days when she had oftentimes called at Courtornieu and invited Blanche to spend a day at Sairmeuse. Then the two girls embraced each other, their roles were reversed. It was Marie-Anne who had been

crushed by misfortune; but it was Blanche who wept. However, while writing down the names of the persons in the neighbourhood with whom she was acquainted, Mademoiselle de Courtornieu did not neglect this favourable opportunity for verifying the suspicions which Martial's momentary agitation had roused in her breast.

"It is inconceivable," she remarked to her friend, "that the Duke de Sairmeuse should allow you to be reduced to such an extremity."

Marie-Anne's nature was so loyal, that although the remark was levelled against a man, who had treated her father most cruelly, she at once resented its injustice. "The duke is not to blame," she replied gently, "he offered us a very considerable sum, this morning, through his son."

Mademoiselle Blanche started as if a viper had stung her. "So you have seen the marquis, Marie-Anne?" she said.

"Yes."

"Has he been to your house?"

"He was going there, when he met me in the grove near La Rèche." As Marie-Anne spoke the recollection of Martial's impertinent gallantry brought a blush to her cheeks.

Blanche, despite her precocious experience, misunderstood the cause of her friend's confusion. Still she was an adept at dissimulation, and she took leave of Marie-Anne with every outward sign of sincere affection. In reality, however, she was well-nigh suffocating with rage. "What!" she thought, "they have met but once, and yet they are so strongly impressed with one another! Do they love each other already?"

VIII.

BLANCHE DE COURTORNIEU would probably have been extremely astonished if Martial had faithfully reported to her everything he heard in her father's cabinet. He was himself passably amazed by the opinions he heard expressed and the projects he heard enunciated. Above all, he was really disgusted with the ridiculous greed displayed by M. de Courtornieu's noble guests. Decorations, fortune, honours, power—they desired everything. They were satisfied that their sentimental devotion to the throne deserved the most munificent rewards; and it was only the most modest among them, who declared that he would rest content with the epaulettes of a lieutenant-general. Recrimination, rancour, and reproach were persistently indulged in, and the Marquis de Courtornieu, who acted as president of the council, soon grew exhausted with exclaiming: "Be calm, gentlemen, be calm! A little moderation, if you please!"

"All these men are mad," thought Martial, with difficulty restraining an intense desire to laugh; "they are insane enough to be placed in an asylum."

It so happened that he was not obliged to render a report of what transpired, for soon after his arrival in the cabinet the deliberations were fortunately interrupted by a summons to dinner, and when he rejoined Blanche, she had quite forgotten to question him about the doings of the council. In fact, what were these people's hopes and plans to her? These greedy nobles were all below her father in rank, and most of them were much less rich than he. Moreover, a matter of personal interest had engaged all her attention. She had been absorbed in thought since Marie-Anne's departure—in thought of Martial, with whose mind and person she was decidedly.

pleased. He possessed all the qualifications an ambitious woman could desire in a husband—and she had decided that *she* would marry him. She would most likely not have arrived at this conclusion so quickly, had it not been for the feeling of jealousy, aroused in her mind by the belief that he was coveted by another woman, for the heart had nothing to do with her newborn desire, which was one of those counterfeit brain passions so often mistaken for real love. As for the outcome of her fancy, she never once thought that she might possibly reap defeat in lieu of victory: for over and over again had her flatterers told her that the man she chose must esteem himself fortunate above all others. She had seen her father besieged by so many suitors for her hand; and, besides, her mirror told her that she was as pretty—nay, far prettier than Marie-Anne; whilst she possessed other advantages which her rival could lay no claim to: birth, wit, and a genius for coquetry!

The result of Mademoiselle de Courtornieu's meditations was that during dinner she exercised all her powers of fascination upon the young marquis. She was so evidently desirous of pleasing him that several of the guests remarked it. Some were even shocked by her forwardness. But Blanche de Courtornieu could do as she chose, as she herself was well aware. Was she not the richest heiress for miles and miles around? No slander can tarnish the brilliancy of such a fortune as she would one day possess.

Martial yielded unresistingly to the charm of his position. How could he suspect unworthy motives in a girl whose eyes had such an expression of virgin purity, and whose laugh bespoke the happy gaiety of innocent maidenhood. Involuntarily he compared the seemingly light-hearted Blanche with the grave and thoughtful Marie-Anne, and his imagination turned from one to the other, inflamed by the strangeness of the contrast. He occupied a seat beside Mademoiselle de Courtornieu at table, and they chatted gaily, amusing themselves at the expense of the other guests, who were again conversing upon political matters, and whose royalist enthusiasm waxed warmer and warmer as the repast proceeded. Champagne was served with the dessert; and the company drank to the allies by the force of whose victorious bayonets the king had managed to return to Paris; they drank to the English, to the Prussians, and to the Russians, whose horses were trampling the harvests of France under foot.

The name of D'Escorval heard above the clink of the glasses, suddenly roused Martial from his dream of enchantment. An old nobleman had just risen, and proposed that active measures should be taken to rid the neighbourhood of the Baron d'Escorval. "Such a man's presence dishonours our province," said he, "he is a frantic Jacobin, and Fouché has him on the list of suspected persons, a plain proof that he is a dangerous character. Even now he is under the surveillance of the police."

Had M. d'Escorval heard these remarks, and had he seen the savage glances which the listeners exchanged, he would certainly have felt anxious for his safety. Still, if the old nobleman's proposal met with approving looks, the various guests plainly hesitated about giving it their formal sanction. Martial's easy gaiety of a moment before had now quite vanished, and he was as pale as death. A terrible struggle was going on in his mind—a conflict between honour and desire. A few hours previously he had longed for a means to get rid of Maurice, and now the opportunity presented itself. It was impossible to imagine a better one. If the old nobleman's proposals were adopted, the Baron d'Escorval and his family would be forced to leave France forever!

Martial noted the hesitation of the company, and felt that a word from him would probably decide the matter. What should he do—should he second the suggestion or oppose it? He did not reflect for long. The voice of honour imperatively commanded him to do his duty. Rising from his seat he declared that the suggestion was most impolitic. “M. d’Escorval,” he said “is one of those men whose spirit of honesty and justice has made them rightly popular. He fully deserves the general esteem in which he is held in the district. And by attacking him you would make many malcontents among those whose support it is our duty to obtain in the interests of the monarchy.”

The young marquis’s cold and haughty manner, his few but incisive words decided the question. “We had better leave the baron alone. It would be a great mistake to attack him,” such were the comments exchanged on every side.

When Martial sat down again Blanche de Courtornieu leant towards him. “You have acted rightly,” she murmured. “I see you know how to defend your friends.” “M. d’Escorval is not my friend,” replied Martial, in a voice which revealed the struggle through which he had passed. “The injustice of the proposal incensed me, that is all.”

Mademoiselle de Courtornieu was not to be deceived by an explanation like this. Still, feigning to accept it, she quietly added: “Then your conduct is all the more admirable M. le Marquis.”

Such was not the opinion of the Duke de Sairmeuse, however. On returning to the château some hours later, he reproached his son for his intervention. “Why the deuce did you meddle with the matter?” he inquired. “I should not have liked to take upon myself the odium of the proposition, but since it had been made——”

“I was anxious to prevent such an act of useless folly!”

“Useless folly! Zounds! marquis, you carry matters with a high hand. Do you think that cursed baron adores you? What would you say if you heard that he was conspiring against us?”

“I should answer with a shrug of the shoulders.”

“You would! Very well then, just do me the favour to question Chupin.”

The Duke de Sairmeuse had only been a fortnight in France; he had scarcely shaken the dust of exile from his feet, and already his imagination saw enemies on every side. He had slept but two nights in the château of his forefathers, and yet he accepted the venomous reports which Chupin poured into his ears as unhesitatingly as if they had been gospel truth. The suspicions which he tried to instil into Martial’s mind were, however, cruelly unjust.

At the very moment when the duke accused M. d’Escorval of conspiring against the house of Sairmeuse, the baron was weeping at the bedside of his son, whose life he feared for. Maurice was indeed dangerously ill. Mental agony had overcome him, and with his nervous organism the circumstance was not surprising. After leaving the grove near La Rèche in obedience with M. Lacheneur’s orders, he had mechanically returned home, a hundred conflicting thoughts battling in his mind. What did it all mean? The marquis’s insults, Lacheneur’s feigned anger, Marie-Anne’s obstinacy—all the incidents in which he had just taken part combined to crush him; and so singular was his demeanour that the peasants who met him on the way felt convinced that some great calamity had befallen the D’Escorval family. When he reached home his mother experienced a terrible shock on perceiving the wild, haggard expression of his features. Still, he had enough

strength of mind left to try and reassure her. "It is all over" he exclaimed in a tremulous voice "but don't be worried, mother; for I have some courage left as you shall see."

He did, in fact, seat himself at the dinner-table with a resolute air. He ate even more than usual; and his father noticed, without alluding to it, that he drank more wine than he was in the habit of doing. He was very pale, his eyes glittered, his manner and appearance were suggestive of the febrile agitation from which he was suffering, and he spoke in a husky tone, talking much and at times even jesting.

"Why won't he cry," thought Madame d'Escorval; "then I shouldn't be so much alarmed, and I could try to comfort him."

This was Maurice's last effort. Directly dinner was over he went upstairs to his room, and when his mother, after repeatedly listening at the door, finally decided to enter and ascertain what he was about, she found him lying upon the bed, muttering incoherently. He did not appear to recognize or even to see her; and when she spoke to him, he did not seem to hear. His face was scarlet, and his lips were parched. She took hold of his hand and found that it was burning and this although his body trembled, and his teeth chattered as if with cold.

No words could describe Madame d'Escorval's agony on making this discovery. For a moment she feared she was about to faint: but, summoning all her strength, she sprang to the staircase, and cried: "Help! help! My son is dying!"

With a bound, M. d'Escorval reached his son's room, and after a brief inspection, instructed a servant to saddle a horse and gallop to Montaignac for a doctor without delay. It is true that there was a medical man at Sairmeuse, but he was a disgrace to his profession. After serving for a short time as an army surgeon he had been dismissed for absolute incompetency. The peasants shunned him as they would have shunned the plague; and in cases of sickness they always sent for the village curé. M. d'Escorval now followed their example, in this respect well knowing that the physician from Montaignac could not possibly arrive long before morning.

The Abbé Midon had never frequented a medical school, but since he had been ordained to Sairmeuse the poor had so often asked for his advice that he had applied himself to the study of medicine, and, aided by experience, had acquired a knowledge of the healing art, well worthy of a faculty diploma. No matter at what hour of the day or night his parishioners chanced to beg his help, he was always ready—and the same answer invariably greeted their appeals: "Let us go at once." Thus, when the people of the neighbourhood met him on the road with his little medicine bag slung over his shoulder, they doffed their hats respectfully and stood aside to let him pass. Those who did not respect the priest honoured the man.

When the abbé learnt that M. d'Escorval needed his advice he set out at once. The baron was his friend, and he was anxious to do everything in his power to save young Maurice whom the frightened messenger described as almost dead. The priest was just in sight of Escorval when the baroness rushed out to meet him, and her manner was so suggestive of despair that the abbé feared she was about to announce some irreparable misfortune. But, no—she took his hand, and, without uttering a word, led him to her son's room. Maurice's condition was indeed critical, but it was not hopeless as the priest at once perceived; "We will get him out of this," he said with a smile that re-awakened hope.

And then, with the coolness of an old practitioner, he bled his patient,

freely, and ordered applications of ice to his head. In a moment, all the household was busy executing the curé's various orders. He took advantage of the opportunity thus offered to draw the baron aside, and inquire what had happened.

"A disappointment in love," replied M. d'Escorval, with a despairing gesture. "Yesterday afternoon M. Lacheneur refused to let his daughter marry Maurice, who, however, was to have seen Marie-Anne to-day. What passed between them I don't know, but you see what is the result."

At this moment the baroness re-entered the room and the abbé was unable to make any rejoinder. Maurice was now more excited than ever; and in his delirium he frequently muttered the names of Marie-Anne, Martial de Sairmeuse, and Chanlouineau. The hours slowly passed without bringing any change in his condition, and the vigil, shared by the distressed parents and their friend the priest, was an anxious one indeed. Dawn was just at hand, when the stillness out of doors was broken by the sound of a horse's hoofs approaching at a swift gallop along the neighbouring highway. A few minutes later, and the doctor from Montaignac entered the house.

"There is no motive for immediate alarm," he said, after carefully examining Maurice and conferring with the abbé. "Nothing more could be done at present. The fever must take its course, but I will return to-morrow."

He did return every day during the ensuing week, and not until his eighth visit did he proclaim Maurice to be out of danger. Then it was that the Baron d'Escorval sought information concerning the cause of this dangerous attack, and learnt from his son what had transpired in the pine grove near La Rèche.

"Are you sure," asked the baron, when Maurice had finished his narrative, "are you sure that you correctly understood Marie-Anne's reply? Did she really tell you that even if her father gave his consent to your marriage, she would refuse hers?"

"Those were her very words."

"And still she loves you?"

"I am sure of it."

"You were not mistaken in M. Lacheneur's tone when he said to you: 'Be off you young wretch! do you want to render all my precautions useless?'"

"No."

M. d'Escorval sat for a moment in silence. "This passes comprehension, he murmured at last. And then so low that his son could not hear him, he added: "I will see Lacheneur to-morrow: this mystery must be explained."

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